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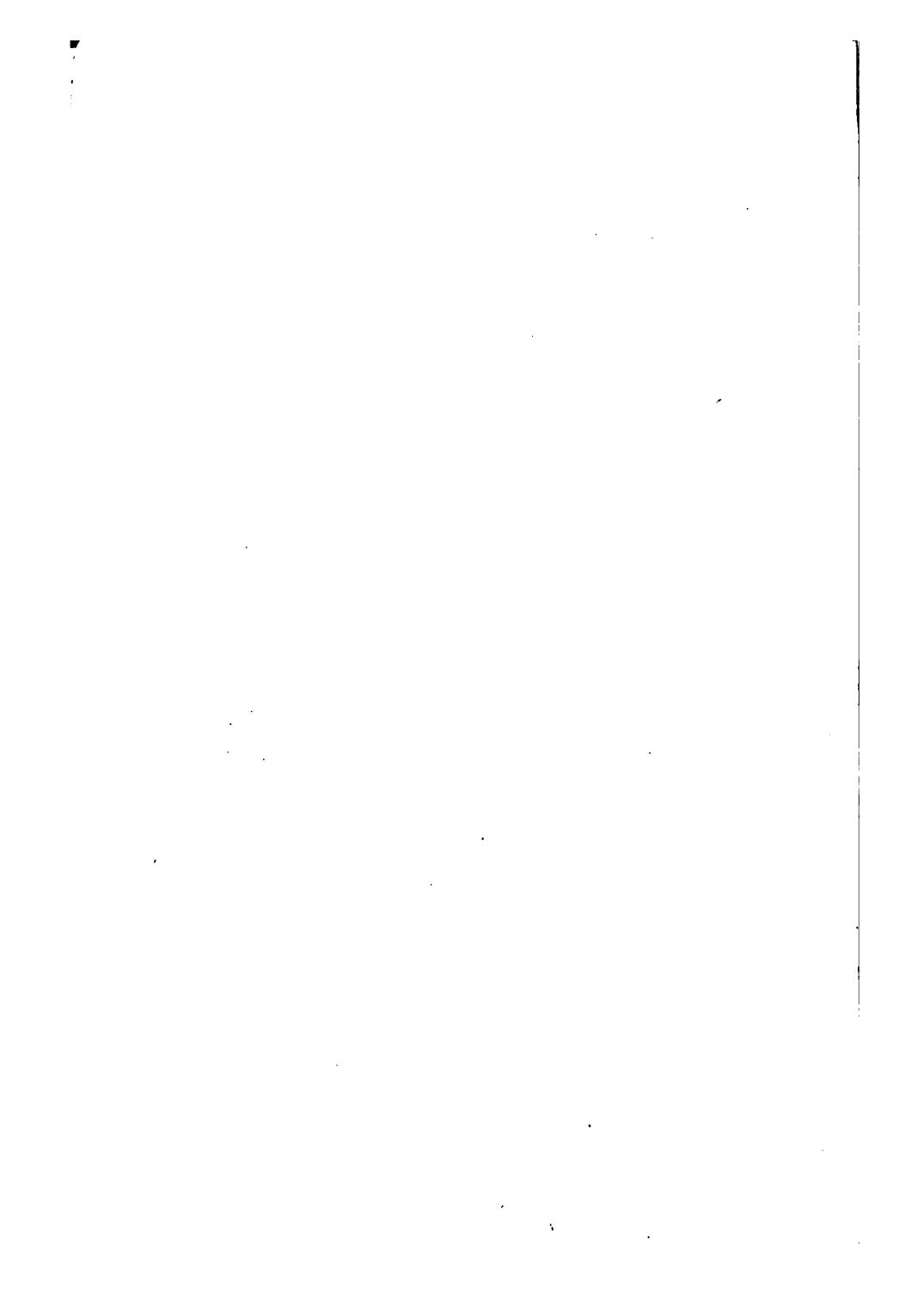
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LORD CASTLETON'S WARD.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. B. R. GREEN.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



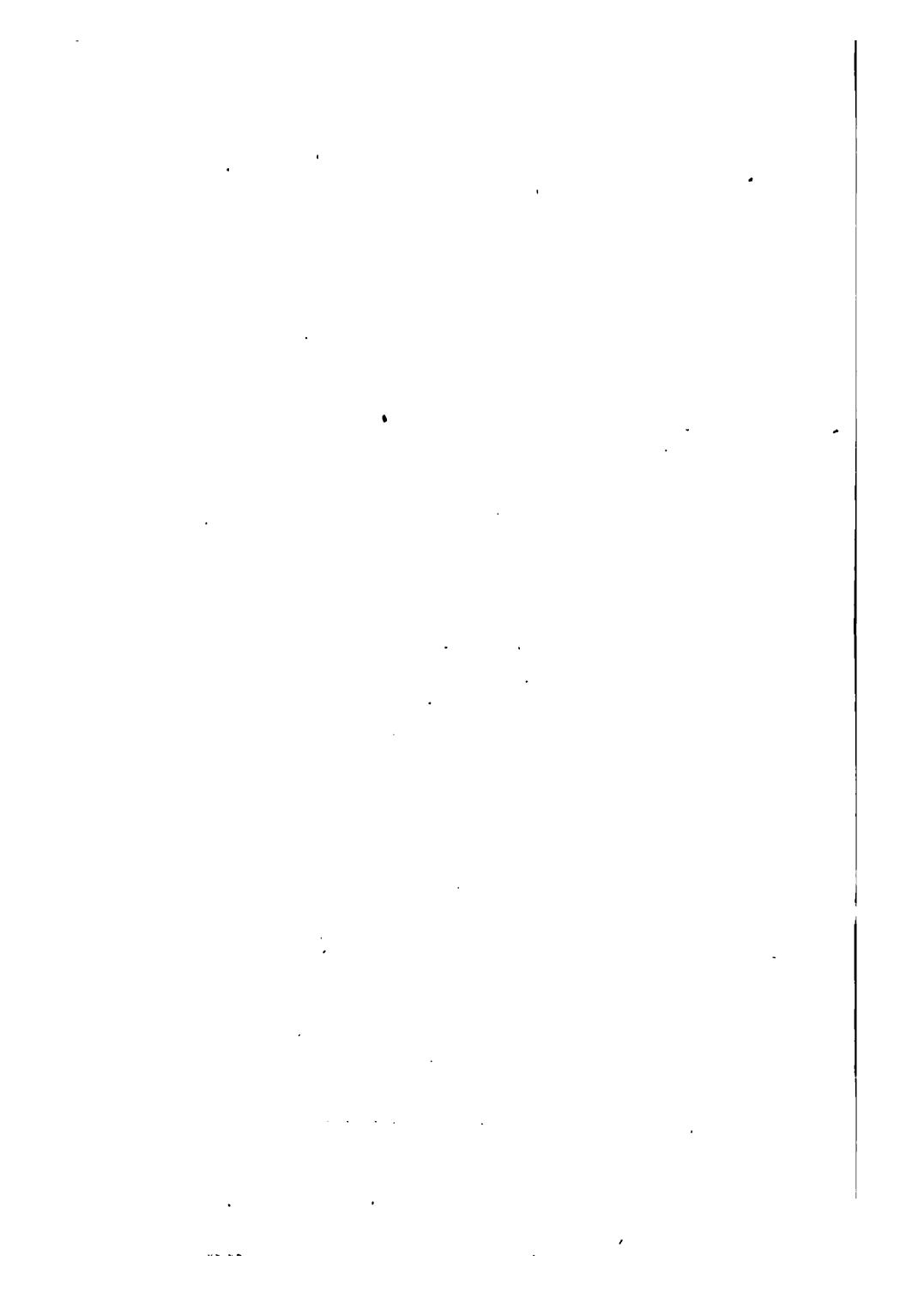
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251. b. 203.



LORD CASTLETON'S WARD.

CHAPTER I.

I was born to speak all mirth and no matter.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

IT was a bright, spirit-stirring morning—when is it otherwise in Naples? Not a cloud stained the pearly arch of heaven, while a hundred snowy sails studded the glittering surface of the bay in which that heaven was mirrored. A soft breeze from the mountains just waved the flowering shrubs and the silken curtains that shaded a small but elegant apartment in which sat Madame St. Marée and Florence, the former deep in the intricacies of a new purse-stitch, the latter, it might be deeper still, in a volume of poems.

Near them was Lord Castleton, ostensibly writing letters, but really gazing with all a lover's passionate rapture upon the half-averted, but conscious face of his betrothed, as a thousand varying expressions flitted over it. At last he made the discovery that it had taken over the half-hour to get down a single page; this was

slow work; his ideas were confused too; as well give it up. He rose and leaned over Florence's chair.

"Studying the Philosophy of Love?" asked he, referring to the title of the book.

She looked up with a glittering smile, half saucy, half shy, as she shook from her fair brow a shower of golden curls. "I am afraid I shall never study philosophy to much account, Stratford, unless you come and simplify it."

"Shall I lend you Plato?"

"Yes, if you had rather I were a pupil of his."

"He had far rather retain you a pupil of his own, my love," said the marchioness, stepping out upon the balcony, from whence she presently returned to announce the advent of Frank Vivian. "He is rushing on at the rate of a mile a minute, and the groom is close by, leading your Rosinante, Florence; but the sun is too high in the heavens to ride at this time of the day."

"But I'm afraid we are under an engagement to do so."

"Then we must break the engagement, my love. We are not Red Indians. Cantering along the base of Vesuvius, beneath the scorching rays of a meridian sun, is a feat beyond me. We must get off at all hazards. It's a poor general that can't beat a retreat."

"It's an accomplished one that can," subjoined Castleton, and Vivian, followed by Bathurst, entered.

"At last, Mr. Vivian, we see you. What is your apology for keeping us so long waiting your pleasure?" inquired her ladyship, with a very grave face.

"Is it possible, madam, that I can have been guilty of such courtesy? Surely, surely, no time was fixed."

"You should forestall time where a lady is concerned, Mr. Vivian."

"Forgive me, I had been too transported to have done so, could I have hoped your ladyship would ride at an earlier hour." He turned to Florence, "I will perform a pilgrimage barefoot by way of atonement, sweet lady, so you will seal my pardon," and he placed his hand somewhere about the region of his heart.

"Can't you find it, Frank?" asked Castleton, smiling.

"Find what?"

"Your heart—you were exploring its locality, I thought."

"No, Castleton; it is gone, irretrievably gone."

"When did you first miss it, Mr. Vivian?" asked Florence, naïvely.

"In the thrice-blissful moment in which I

beheld Madlle. de Malcé," he returned with a deep salutation.

The lady both looked and felt embarrassed, but then the speaker was such a wild-bird that no one ever dreamed of attaching significance to his sallies, and before she had decided whether to smile or to frown he was drawing caricatures on the fly-leaf of the last new novel, and with a blush at her simplicity she turned to reply to the marchioness's inquiry whether the horses should not be sent back.

"Oh no, no, I do beseech you," implored Vivian, rushing to the window, "in pity to yon poor brute let him have his canter. Do but see, too, how impatiently Mustapha is pawing the ground—he is looking up as if to pray you, if not for his master's sake for his own, to relent."

But the ride, in defiance of the petitioner, was postponed till the cool of the evening.

"Do you know, Madlle. de Malcé," said Vivian, gazing admiringly at the superb animal which had acquired a twofold value in his eyes, since the praises bestowed on it by that young lady, "that I purpose writing an epitaph on Mustapha when he shuffles off that carnal coil ? Byron immortalized his dog, why should I not do the like by my gallant steed ?"

"Why not, indeed, if like Byron your verse can confer immortality."

"Is it the deserts of my gallant gray or of his master, of which you are dubious?"

"Can any one question the deserts of Mustapha," archly asked the smiling girl, "maugre his pagan sobriquet?"

"Your most obedient, Madlle. de Malcé; how I envy Mustapha the honour of your preference; he is immortalized without my 'in memoriam.'"

"Florence, my love, do silence Sir Scatterbrain; we have despatches from Rome, we shall I expect be charmingly located there. Mr. Vivian, you will find some books on the sofa. J——'s last, have you read it?"

"No, but I read his first, and it has saved a world of trouble. They are all bottles from the same bin, I am told."

"Well, they have a strong family resemblance, I must allow, and are rather milk-and-water."

"Milk, with a very unfair preponderance of water, I should say, like the sky-blue ration of a boarding-school miss."

"Here's a volume of poems just out, Frank. 'From the Greek Mythology.' Perfect gems, in a setting of gold."

"Indeed! Who claims the authorship?"

"Edmund Ollier. You will be enchanted with the delicious play of fancy, the subtle delicacy

of thought ; and he will produce something far finer yet—he *must* go on progressing.”

“ It’s an age of progression,” said the marquis ; “ with all its faults a grand age, a Titan age this 19th century, and yet men still talk of ‘ the good old times,’ and extol the hanging days of his most sacred majesty George the Third. You boys may be thankful you came into the world half a century or so later.”

“ Why, sir, do you think we thereby lost a chance of being gibbeted at Tyburn for stealing a nag or strangling a baby ?”

“ I won’t hazard a surmise ; hanging like wiving goes by destiny they say ; you may escape Scylla, yet be swallowed up by Charybdis.”

“ His lordship is clearly dubious either of your destiny or your deserts,” said her ladyship.

“ Clearly ; and being out of my parish I can’t get my character backed by the churchwardens.”

“ You had better be put up to public auction, Frank.”

“ Do, Mr. Vivian ; I’ll knock you down with all the pleasure in life,” subjoined Bathurst.

“ No end of acknowledgments ; but perhaps some one will buy me in.”

“ We must decide first upon your value,” said her ladyship. “ Imprimis—what are your vices ?”

"I have none."

"And your virtues?"

"Their name is legion."

"Doucement, doucement; you are not to be your own appraiser. What if we reverse the medal, virtues nil, vices legion, and knock you down at once—going! going! gone!"

"Castleton, as an old college chum, won't you put in a disclaimer against this summary mode of dismissing my case? A flattering epitaph for the tomb of the last of the Vivians. 'Virtues nil, vices legion.'"

"Depend upon it, Frank, you have been hammered down at a fair computation, you know the old distich—

"The value of a thing
Is just the money that 'twill bring.'

"I know the proverb, stale but trite, 'Give a dog an ill name, and fling him overboard at once.'"

The ladies laughed as they left the room, taking with them the despatch from Rome, and Vivian and Bathurst were alone together, for the marquis sauntered into the billiard-room adjoining, and Castleton presently followed.

Bathurst fell into moody reverie, Vivian hummed a tune, then turned to his companion.

"Why, Bathurst, you look silent, sad, and savage as an extinct volcano."

"That may be because I feel 'silent, sad, and savage,' Mr. Vivian."

"Then you must be in love."

"If I am I dare say you can't prescribe a cure."

"But indeed I can, an infallible one I am told:—matrimony. Try it, but you are young in years as yet for so hazardous an experiment; I fancy, Mr. Bathurst, you must be about nineteen."

"Perhaps, sir, you would like to consult my baptismal register?"

"Quite superfluous—your sensitiveness on this point helps my conclusion. At twenty-five, thoroughly out of leading-strings, we are much above that sort of thing, supremely indifferent to abstract speculation on the score of age."

"At any rate, sir, your present deduction is a false one. It is some months since I completed my nineteenth year."

"Some months; that's a trifle vague, but we'll despatch the remaining odd months on their travels. Say you passed them on the road at express speed, and giving you this benefit, set you down at twenty."

"Well, sir, and what then?" This was said very sharply.

"Well, as a general rule in the code matrimonial, the gentleman should be two, three, or four years in advance of the lady:—now deducting four from twenty brings the demoiselle to charming bread-and-butter sixteen;—good, at sixteen she can afford to wait, say a couple of years, and in that space of time, unless you are full fifty fathoms deep in the toils of the love-god, in short at fever heat, the thing will have worked its own cure."

"There are some men," said Bathurst, "so light of heart that a couple of months would suffice to bring about such a result."

"True, there are; I think I know some of that stamp myself."

"I am *sure* I do," subjoined Bathurst, significantly, and he turned indignantly away.

His tormentor sung in a rich soprano,

"'For me, I adore some fifty or more.'"

"Gentlemen," called out the marquis from the ante-room, "when you have ended this keen encounter of your wits you will perhaps join us in a game of billiards?"

"Oh!" eagerly exclaimed Bathurst, "Mr. Vivian is no doubt at your service; I dare say he will be as proud to display his dexterity in the

bowling of balls as in the bowling of ladies' hearts."

"When I have expressed my acknowledgements to Mr. Bathurst for his politeness in accepting an invitation in my behalf without consulting me," said Vivian, "I will join you with pleasure. Mr. Bathurst, I do not presume to interfere with your privilege to accept or decline your own engagements. His lordship waits, I believe, your reply."

Bathurst looked a trifle disconcerted. "I will plead off if you please, sir; I have a letter to write that scarcely admits of delay."

"Ah, *déjà si avancé*," exclaimed the incorrigible Vivian, his momentary temper recovered. "Dangerous weapons those billets-doux, Bathurst. One caution and I'm off."

"Well, sir."

"Ah, my poor fellow, not so well," and he gave a Burleigh shake of the head. "Be chary of black and white, give the gentlemen of the long robe no chance to cut you up like so much mince-meat, for they would show as little compunction as a Shylock in the business. No fear but they would exact their pound of flesh."

"You are pleased to be facetious, sir."

"Not at all; take my word for it, it's by no means a matter for mirth. Nothing, I grant,

like a breach of promise to extend your popularity, but it leaves a woful deficit at your bankers'; but I forget, you are a minor. Viva ! Viva ! Safe for the present. Lucky dog!"

"Vivian," exclaimed Castleton, now really displeased with his friend's folly, "you are detaining his lordship," and the wild young man, in some awe of Castleton despite his affection for him, bounded across the room, seized his cue, and was presently absorbed in the game.

* * * * *

The next day when Vivian paid his accustomed visit, he found the whole party talking of their departure. "I shall leave Naples with regret," said Florence, "but I shall not feel as I did when I sighed a last adieu to Venice. Ah, Venice is my Arcadia!"

"The saints defend us ! Venice an Arcadia ! A sailing yacht were a fitter designation," said the marquis, "for you float about from morning to night, till you begin to doubt whether you are not a collateral branch of the finny tribe."

"My dear sir, you must surely have forgotten those charming rides on the shores of the Lido," said Bathurst.

"And the walks by the 'deep-dyed Brenta,'" chimed in the young lady.

"By this good light, May-blossom, I remember neither; I saw no carriages but water-carriages, no horses but the brazen steeds of Lysippus. Your 'deep-dyed Brenta' I won't gainsay, for in its sallow unwholesomeness, it bore a marvellous similitude to English pea-soup or Scotch porridge—yes, it was 'deep-dyed,' with a vengeance."

"Treason all! If I had been born a Sappho, Venice would have been my Helicon."

"It should be anything but my mortal abode; my Helicon if you will, for I must be inspired, which I take to be a state of semi-lunacy, before I lived in such an amphibious place. I never so longed for a steeple-chase as when I was in Venice; I would have given worlds for a meet of the hounds."

"Treason! treason still!" murmured the same sweet accents; "you know it is all treason. Venice with her liquid belt, her marble domes, her Oriental grace, and her dark, gliding, dreamy gondolas. Oh! she is the very loveliest city in all the earth."

"In the water you mean," persisted the marquis.

"But, my dear sir," at last interposed Vivian, "her ladyship is actually making arrangements for departure from hence; you will not surely sanction it?"

"Why do you make your appeal to me, Vivian? the ladies carry everything by storm nowadays. We have but to kiss hands under the new act, and seal the bargain."

"And may I so seal the bargain?" asked Vivian, advancing a few steps, and glancing saucily at the marchioness.

"Better not tempt your destiny," she gaily returned; "the fair hand of Elizabeth of England fell not so roughly on the cheek of her favourite as mine, albeit of Titania-like proportions, might chance to do on thine, Sir Sauce-box."

"Le miel est doux, mais l'abeille pique, you see," said his lordship.

"But who heeds the sting so he secure the honey? Scratches are the fortune of war.—But pray relieve my apprehensions, you do not really meditate so hasty a flight?"

"What do you mean by so 'hasty a flight,' Vivian? We shall dine first. Odds life, man, are you too in a rabid state! Have we not seen all the sublimities or antiquities—the terms are synonymous I believe—throughout Calabria? Have we not feasted at Herculaneum——"

"And starved at Amalfi?" groaned Vivian.

"Exactly; and made fresh discoveries at Pompeii? to say nothing of being nearly engulfed in the crater of Vesuvius, and yet your appetite is unsated?"

"But it's just the season for Naples, sir ; no sunsets are comparable with those of Naples in the autumn, nor can the sun (Madlle. de Malcé and Venice forgiving me), elsewhere shine down on such a scene ; altogether there's so much poetic beauty in the place."

"Poetic nonsense ! Vivian, you are as demented as the rest. The place is well enough, maugre one's ceaseless dread of being knocked down by sun-stroke or swallowed up by an earthquake. As for the people they remind one of the Irish ; they can serve up no dish without the garnish of flattery by way of sauce."

"Ah, but it's sauce piquant, and that is more than you will get in the Holy City."

"So we escape the sloth and luxury of Neapolitan life, I am content. I resign myself to it here *selon les règles*, but all my better feelings are in revolt. Bathurst, too, has never been himself since we entered the place."

"And I shall not break my heart at leaving it, sir."

He was thinking of the happier days that preceded Vivian's advent.

"Then your heart must be adamant, Bathurst—not regret the exchange of the delights of Naples for the gloom of the 'Eternal' City ?"

"Indeed, no!"

"Ten million pardons, but the thing's not feasible."

"I give you my honour."

"No, don't, I've so much of my own I should only find it an encumbrance."

"On the word of a gentleman then."

"There again, the term gentleman is so vague nowadays, there's no understanding the signs thereof. My bootmaker had the coolness to style himself a gentleman the other day."

"Was he making the distinction personal?" asked the youth, smiling with provoking significance.

"Very pointed indeed, Mr. Bathurst, but with submission, repartee should, at least in the gentleman's sense, be polished, as well as pointed."

"I bow to your judgment, Mr. Vivian, but mine was a question rather than a repartee."

"Very oracular, I bow in turn to your amendment—you are beginning to feel your feet, Mr. Bathurst, kicking over the traces; in general, you know, you are not au fait at this style of thing."

"No, I'm apprehensive of trenching upon your special prerogative. It's pleasanter, too, shooting in your own preserves than your neighbour's."

"You are really too generous—I see you keep

a corps-de-reserve for special occasions," and Vivian crossed over to Madame St. Marée.

"This departure—are you still inexorable? Can no prayers move you?"

She laughed at his empressement.

"None that thou hast wit enough to make, 'Signor Gratiano.'"

"On my life, you are no less obdurate than Shylock.—Madame de Malcé, dare I make my appeal to you?"

She shook her head. "We are in such a lamentable minority, Mr. Vivian; even Mr. Bathurst has, you see, turned deserter."

"Then I must bid Regnier tumble my chattels into the portmanteau, and follow you."

"That will be delightful," she returned, with a too bewitching smile.

Was it that smile, and those thoughtless but gracious words, that sent the blood in a tide of crimson from the heart to the cheek of Frank Vivian? Anyway, the quicksilver of his volatile spirit was stirred, for with a hurried and even agitated adieu he left them.

CHAPTER II.

I have too griev'd a heart
To take a tedious leave : thus losers part.
MERCHANT OF VENICE.

LORD CASTLETON sat alone in the ante-room of one of the saloons the morning after Vivian's precipitate flight on hearing of the meditated departure from Naples, when, with his usual impetuosity, his friend flung open the door.

"Reading, my dear fellow? I'm afraid I shall interrupt you."

"I'm afraid you will, Frank."

"Umph! You're polite at least."

"Ca va sans dire," returned his lordship, without, however, looking up from his book.

"Now don't be sententious, I want to talk to you."

"I submit," was the response, given with the air of a martyr, "but *do* sit down, and *don't* be noisy."

"Oh, I can't sit; besides I'm in a tremendous hurry."

"That you always are."

"Well, but I'm serious."

"That you never are."

"Not often, I grant, but '*tempora mutantur*',

you know. I—I'm a great blockhead, I believe."

His lordship bowed. "It would be rude to contradict you, Frank."

"Pshaw! Nonsense! To be candid with you, my dear Castleton, I'm in love."

"With yourself?"

"No. Do you take me for Narcissus?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, but I am, indeed."

"What? Narcissus?"

"No, in love; and with the sweetest, the most incompara——"

Castleton waived his hand. "Yes, yes; I'll take all that for granted, credit your houri with every imaginable, and unimaginable, perfection under the sun, and so save your time and my own, as well as a bankruptcy among the superlatives of the language."

"Why what a petrification thou art, Castleton;" and Vivian paced the room much after the fashion of the polar bear at the Zoological Gardens.

His lordship groaned as he cut another leaf of his book. "Would that I could return the compliment, Frank—you would furnish no inapt illustration of perpetual motion."

Vivian stamped his foot. "I don't care a jot for perpetual motion. Castleton, will you listen

to me ? if not I must make my appeal to Mademoiselle de Malcé herself."

The petrifaction was no longer a petrifaction, the breath of life was breathed into the Pygmalion statue. The book fell from his hands, and he was on his feet in a brace of seconds.

"Mademoiselle de Malcé !" he echoed as the colour mounted to his very temples. "What in the world has Mademoiselle de Malcé to do with you, or your love matters ?"

"Everything, or I am undone, for I have come to throw myself at her feet."

Castleton re-seated himself, and shading his face with his hand, tried to calm himself.

"And why have you consulted me on the subject ?" asked he at length.

"Because you are Mademoiselle de Malcé's guardian—luckily for me, or you must inevitably have become her lover."

"Does the adoption of the first character disqualify a man, then, for the second ?"

"Oh, undeniably ; at least one never associates the one with the other. Why a girl would as soon think of falling in love with her grandmother as with her guardian ; she mostly, indeed, regards him with peculiar aversion."

In spite of his clear common sense, Castleton was strangely affected by this speech. In the character of the devoted lover, there were times

when he ceased to remember the colder one of guardian ; but his companion rattled on, heedless, and indeed unconscious, of his embarrassment ; though, to do him justice, he seemed far more sensible of the lady's perfections than his own, and at last wound up the story of his love with such an earnest yet modest appeal to Castleton, as the party most interested in the matter, next to the young lady herself, that he was sensibly touched. He saw that Vivian was truly and deeply attached to his beautiful ward, and he could not but know and feel that he was hopelessly so. Castleton knew Frank Vivian to be volatile ; but he also knew him for a fine, high-hearted, manly fellow ; and there is something inexpressibly painful in crushing the first fond hopes of a young and ardent spirit. Then there was the awkwardness of explaining how matters actually stood between himself and the lady, for it is excessively awkward to be forced to listen to an avowal of love for the very one to whom you are yourself bound heart and hand, and then have to return the favour by a like disclosure of your own views and sentiments in the same quarter. Still no particle of jealousy or mistrust mingled itself with Castleton's feelings ; he was distressed, very keenly distressed, for his friend, but in no degree apprehensive on his own account ; he had but ill deserved that

heart of gold if he could have profaned its perfect truth by the shadow of a doubt. But while he mused with no unthoughtful brow upon the unpalatable nature of the communication he had to make, Vivian, without a particle of his ordinary confidence, nay, with diffident yet manly sincerity, descended upon the ardour of his passion.

" You see, Castleton, presuming that I can ever hope to awaken an interest in this most charming girl's affections, though it would not at present be in my power to place a coronet upon her brow, the time cannot be very far distant when the Ashley title and estates must be mine ; and for settlements, she shall have all, every shilling I possess in the world—just sufficient, perhaps, to defray the expenses of a small stud of hunters, and a single pack of hounds, I may reserve."

" With a few other trifles, including your losses at Tattersalls' and on the turf," said Castleton, making a poor attempt at a smile to disguise the real anguish of his feelings.

" True, true ; but I am no gambler, I swear to you, Castleton, I am not."

" I am sure you are not, Frank, I am quite sure you are not," and Castleton warmly pressed his hand ; " I am quite sure you are a worthy, generous fellow, and—"

"And you will tell Mademoiselle de Malcé this," he eagerly exclaimed, returning with interest the pressure of his friend's hand, and looking earnestly, imploringly in his face.

This was too much. Unutterably distressed, Castleton turned silently away.

"Thank you, thank you most heartily, my dear Castleton; there, there, I need no promise, that look assures me of your sympathy and generous intentions in my behalf: and now farewell, for I am so grateful, so happy, so—so overjoyed that, that—" and, to the dismay of Stratford, the gay, the thoughtless, the volatile Frank Vivian burst into tears.

Confused, and powerfully affected, Castleton paced the room like one beside himself. In vain he attempted to speak, a choking sensation deprived him of the power.

Vivian dashed away the tears he thought dishonoured his manhood, and again hastily bade his friend farewell.

Even then, not till he had reached the door, did his lordship find the power of utterance.

"Stay, Vivian, stay!" he exclaimed in passionate accents.

"Oh, I can't stay another minute, my dear Castleton, I must tell my uncle I have secured you as an auxiliary, he will be so anxious till I return;" and in another second he would have

been out of the house if his friend had not laid his hand upon his arm, and, closing the door, said, in a half-suffocated voice,

“Frank, you are deceived ; forgive me, I have been tardy in explaining this matter ; but, dear Frank—you cannot—indeed you cannot, succeed with Mademoiselle de Malcé.”

The young man abruptly paused, and turned deadly pale ; nor was Castleton one whit less moved. He recoiled with a sickening sensation from the task he had to perform. There was something cold, and selfish, and triumphant in it. He would have given anything not to have witnessed that wild burst of joyous emotion that could find no vent but in tears. He could not bear to tell his friend that he had no chance, and in the same breath proclaim himself the victor. He had, however, already extinguished the light of hope, and of gladness, in Vivian’s bright eye, and sent the warm current back to his heart to freeze there ; and the rest was soon told, or rather guessed at, for the extreme agitation of Castleton interpreted it without the aid of many words.

“And why can I not succeed with Mademoiselle de Malcé, Castleton ?”

“Because, Frank,” and Stratford’s hand was laid with infinite gentleness upon his friend’s shoulder, “because she is affianced to another.”

"And with your consent?"

His lordship bowed the affirmative, he could not speak.

"And she loves him to whom she is affianced?"

There was another pause, for Castleton was scarcely prepared for such a question; at any other time, or under other circumstances, he might have hesitated to answer it, but he looked in the poor fellow's face and saw that this was no moment in which to canvass words by the rules of cold punctilio; besides, he was heartsick of this methodical catechism of question and answer.

"I believe—I think—that is, I devoutly trust so," he returned, colouring and stammering like a girl.

Vivian gasped for breath; a light had broken in upon his darkness.

"And—and—" he faltered, "the name of him to whom she is betrothed is—"

"Stratford Castleton, dear Frank," rejoined his lordship, in a tone of singular softness, a tone indicative of the necessity for the avowal, and of the exquisite pain it cost him to make it; but Vivian turned from him, and for many minutes neither spoke; but as Castleton in the agitation of his mind passed and repassed in his rapid strides across the room, Vivian caught a glimpse of the anguished expression of his face, and

after a violent struggle with himself, he held out his hand, and though the cheek was still of an ashen hue, and the lip quivered, the eye had lost something of its wildness.

"Castleton, you will forgive this unhappy mistake, and the pain that I see it has cost you."

"Oh, Frank! let me rather ask pardon of you. I should have foreseen this. Whatever you may generously do, it will be long before I can forgive myself."

"No, Castleton, no! the fault is wholly mine. How I could have been so dull an egotist as to imagine that you could behold such wealth of loveliness unmoved, or that she, holding daily and hourly communion with a mind like yours, could have remained insensible, now appears inconceivable. I was besotted, I believe; my only excuse is, that I was myself under a spell, an enchantment," and the voice faltering at first was now scarcely audible. "Enough of this, however; that I sincerely wish you both the truest happiness you will not wrong me by doubting."

"I do not, Frank, believe me; but a cloud will obscure that happiness so long as I see you suffer. Promise me that you will endeavour to subdue this passion."

"You scarcely do this incomparable lady

justice in conceiving it possible, but I can at least promise you that I will not insult your feelings, or wound hers, by any display of it. I shall not see to-morrow's sun set in Naples. Nay," he continued, seeing his friend about to protest against this resolve, "you cannot seriously urge my stay ; absent, I may learn submission to my fate, but it is hard to behold the prize you may never hope to win, to live in sight of the paradise whose gates are for ever barred and bolted against you. I have no ambition to rehearse the rôle of Tantalus."

Spite of the smile that accompanied this miserable attempt at a jesting strain, Castleton was shocked to see how completely the spirit of the so lately light-hearted young man was beaten down.

" Dear Frank," he exclaimed, " would that I could once again see the old saucy look, hear the old cheery laugh."

" All in good time, caro amico ; perhaps you may one day. I am not one to live on moonshine, but my spirits are a trifle dashed just now."

At that moment the sweet voice of Florence was heard carolling the refrain of an Italian air the poor fellow had himself sung with her. A deadlier hue stole over his face, and wringing his friend's hand, while Castleton faltered forth

a fervent "God bless you—God in heaven bless you, Frank!" he rushed down the stairs and out of the hotel.

With a choking sigh, almost a groan, for he was totally unmanned, Stratford flung himself upon a couch, but he was presently roused by the smiling and unconscious cause of all this mischief. For the first time he failed to greet her entrance with a lover's rapture.

"What makes you so silent, Stratford?" and she looked anxiously in his face, on which the traces of agitation were palpably visible, but apparently he did not heed her question. "Stratford, you are not well; oh! I am sure you are not."

"Indeed, yes; quite."

"Was it not Mr. Vivian who just left you? We have been watching Mustapha's graceful curvets from the balcony. Why did he not come up?"

"What? Mustapha?"

"No, Sir Critic, Mr. Vivian; but I am glad to see you smile. Why did he go without seeing us? But he will lunch with us, I suppose?"

"I fancy not."

"No; how provoking!" and she pouted her pretty lip.

"Is it so much a matter of regret, my darling?"

"Yes, oh yes; I am awfully disappointed.

You know he is the very soul of mirth, and mischief too, for that matter."

Castleton sighed at the contrast of his late mood. "I did not find him the soul of mirth to-day."

"Ah, no, perhaps not alone with you; but then you are so—so——"

"So what, love?" he inquired, looking tenderly yet sadly in her smiling face.

"Perhaps I shall displease you, Stratford," and the little head turned with a swift sweet motion on one side, like a bird's. It was a habit with her.

"Am I so captious, dear one?"

"Captious! Ah, no! only too—too indulgent. I meant that your graver nature would perhaps hold his in check."

"Does it ever check my darling's?"

"Stratford! what an insinuation. That is numbering me with the laughter-loving, giddy throng."

"And ever may you be so numbered, my sweetest. I would not that one note of joy were hushed, one flash of that bright eye quenched; oh! not for a mine of gold."

"There 'tis already quenched," she exclaimed, as a tear gathered to her eye, though the smile that so quickly chased it proclaimed it no herald of grief.

With unutterable tenderness Castleton gazed upon her, and gave a sigh to the ill-starred love of his friend.

"But, Stratford, you have not told me what made Mr. Vivian rush away without seeing us."

"Why so earnest in the matter, my sweet April-eyed girl?"

"Oh, because it is not arranged at what hour we ride to-day; I cannot fancy why he ran away so suddenly, can you?"

"I believe I can, but I did not know his escort was so all-important."

"But indeed it is," she naïvely answered; "besides, he is such a favourite with us all."

Even at the very moment that he condemned his own folly, a transient pang shot across the breast of Castleton at these words. Was it possible that Florence entertained more than a passing regard for this gay and fascinating rattle? To any one but a lover her very frankness had betrayed her indifference, but there is no range to the vagaries of the love-god's votaries. Any way, he argued, he had no right to withhold from his ward, affianced though she was, the knowledge of this proposal for her hand.

Notwithstanding the fancy that had glanced over the surface of his mind, it may be doubted whether Castleton, all honourable and generous though he was, would have risked the commu-

nication if he had not been pretty sure that the issue would be in his own favour. Such is human nature, there is ever some alloy commingled with our best feelings.

"Tell me, dear one, would it grieve you so very deeply if you were not to see Vivian again?"

"Stratford! whatever do you mean? Something—some accident—has happened? Oh! why will you not tell me?"

With a sinking heart Castleton noted the sudden paleness of her cheek.

"No, Florence; no accident, strictly speaking, has happened; but you seem strangely interested."

"Oh, yes," she answered, feelingly but simply.

Castleton started. "Do you love him?" he abruptly asked.

She looked wonderingly into his face. "Do I love whom? Do I love your friend?" And now the tears indeed gathered thickly to her eyes, the blush of wounded pride deepened on her cheek! "Have I quite deserved this, Stratford?"

Those simple words, that sweet sad tone, conveyed an instant reproach to the heart of Castleton; the unworthy, though momentary suspicion melted away before the purity of that look.

"Florence, my own precious love! forgive me, if for one fleeting moment I dared to interpret the interest you expressed in too warm a light.

How devotedly I love you words were powerless to declare ; but, alas ! so much of human infirmity is blended with that love, that it starts at a shadow, and ever apprehensive, trembles, lest the breathing of a sigh, the falling of a tear, should be given to another. How can I plead to be forgiven ?"

" Plead not at all, Stratford, but never—never doubt me."

" Ah ! never think I could, my own. Who that looks upon that angel brow could question its perfect truth ?"

" But why, then, that strange surmise ?"

" In brief, then, Vivian loves you, and has just made me the depository of his secret."

Castleton did not look at her as he made this announcement, for he knew and felt, from the feminine softness of her nature, that she could not hear it unmoved ; he would not that she should, but he was unprepared for what followed.

" Oh, Stratford, do not, do not say so," she exclaimed, clasping her hands appealingly together, while a burning blush spread over every feature ; " do not say you mean it."

" It is even so, my darling. Nay, nay, I cannot allow you to distress yourself thus."

" Not distress myself ! How can I be even the innocent cause of suffering to another, and remain insensible ?"

"No, I am sure you cannot, and it is not the least among my darling's countless perfections that she can sympathize in the pain inflicted, rather than triumph in the conquest gained."

"Is it possible that any one can triumph?"

"Quite possible."

"I have much to learn, I fear."

"I fear it too, for such knowledge will not increase your sum of happiness."

"But, Stratford, I cannot see Mr. Vivian again; indeed I cannot."

"He will scarcely desire you should; yet you will not refuse to bid him farewell if it be his wish?"

"Not if you—not if he desire it. But oh, Stratford! it must be so dreadful to love and not be loved again. You will tell him how sincerely I hope—how deeply I deplore—ah, I don't know what to say, but—" and blushing, she turned a pleading glance on her guardian.

"You are not displeased?"

Involuntarily he smiled at her simplicity.

"With none but myself, dear one. I should have foreseen such an issue."

"Nay, how could you? But this is Mr. Vivian's secret, and must be inviolably kept. I would I had not known it. I shall never, never recur to it, even in thought, without a self-accusing pang."

Could Castleton do other than yield his unfeigned admiration to a heart at once so generous and unsophisticated ?

"Sorrow for another's suffering may be allowed to a heart so warm and tender as my darling's, but no shadow of self-reproach can, or ought, to rest upon it in this instance. Florence de Malcé has not now to learn that few can gaze upon a form where nature's partial hand has been so prodigal, and gaze unmoved ; fewer still discern the yet diviner graces of her mind, and pass on their way unheeding. Where loveliness and virtue meet, who would not bow at the shrine ?"

"But loveliness and virtue may elect whether they will encourage the worshipper," she returned, smiling faintly. "I thought you were too proud to flatter."

"Say, rather, too sincere ; to adore virtue is not to flatter it. I offer incense at no other shrine."

"It were, perhaps, unwise to call your judgment in question in my own case," she returned. "I can but pray that I may never forfeit this exalted opinion."

Approaching footsteps arrested the tender protestations that had replied to this deprecatory speech ; and Florence, really unequal to

see any one, glided out at one door as the marquis entered at the other.

"Alone, Castleton! I thought your mercurial friend had been with you. This divine Parthenope will be the death of me. I shall commit suicide, I know I shall, if I remain in it another week; *you* look half dead too—it's the deuced climate. Do let us do something; there's a fine breeze from the mountains. What if you order your horse and have a race, we'll bet on the winner, anything is better than this stagnation."

"*Au plaisir,*" returned Castleton, and they sallied forth.

Meanwhile Vivian, having very briefly touched upon his disappointment to his uncle, prepared to leave Naples at dawn next day. Argument was unavailing. "He had no wish," he said, "to hurry his departure;" but the kind old man who had left his happy home in England to accompany this beloved kinsman abroad, cared not, so he were content, to be longer exiled from it.

To his anxious inquiries Vivian had answered vaguely that he was "Nonsuited; bankrupt alike in love and friendship; that he was, in short, the most unlucky, the most miserable, dog under the sun."

Fully impressed with the belief that his

nephew was, maugre his little vagaries, the finest fellow living, Mr. Vivian could no way conceive the possibility of his rejection by the young lady, but he forbore to press him on the subject. A few minutes' conversation with Castleton when he made his adieu to the circle placed the affair in its true light, and then, like his nephew, he was astonished at his former blindness.

At the hotel all was wonderment at the abrupt departure of the Vivians; that he, who had only the day before so eloquently urged their prolonged stay, should so suddenly change his mind, and leave without the simple courtesy of one farewell, a line, or even a message, for his uncle's lame attempt at an apology scarcely amounted to such, surprised and pained them, till the guarded silence of Castleton, with the conscious blushes of his ward whenever he was even alluded to, suggested the true reason, and then, as by tacit agreement, he ceased to be the theme of conversation, though all continued to deplore his loss.

It was with a heavy heart that Castleton turned from the door of his friend's residence on calling early next morning, and learning that he had departed at daybreak. Apart from regret at his loss, there was the dreary conviction that he himself had banished him. He felt

as if he had been guilty of some offence, some wrong towards him, and immediately on reaching home he sat down to write very openly to him on the subject of his engagement, and not till he came to the superscription did it occur to him that he had not the remotest idea to what quarter of the globe he was bending his steps.

Amidst all this acute anxiety on the part of Lord Castleton, however, he did not take into account the extreme volatility of Vivian's disposition, and, judging by his own deep-seated devotion to Florence, that he might possibly overrate the extent as well as the endurance of his friend's ; besides, love, uncheered by a gleam of hope, seldom attains to any very great age, and however enthralled by the charms of the lady, Frank Vivian was not, after all, as he himself declared, one to live on moonshine. As Rosalind says, "men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love." Not that we would hereby impugn the loyalty of man, or call in question the respectability of that passion which, since the days of our first parents, has exercised so arbitrary a sway over the human mind ; but the love-god never was, and to the "crack of doom" never will be, anything but a turncoat.

CHAPTER III.

Stop ! for thy tread is on an empire's dust !
CHILDE HAROLD.

THE interval that elapsed between the departure of the Vivians from Naples, and that of the marquis and his party, was very brief.

At a wobegone little albergo at Capua they made their first halt.

"Take the goods the gods provide," said his lordship, as a dinner, such as poor Vivian would have groaned over, was placed before them.

"And if the gods provided no better cheer when the Punic chief was quartered in this goodly town, I should lean to the belief that he and his gallant followers were enervated by want rather than luxury," said Bathurst. "At all events, he and his gallant followers appear to have carried all the luxury away with them, for not a vestige is to be seen."

"Oh ! the poverty of Capua has passed into a proverb," said Castleton.

"And its extortion, too, no doubt," laughed the marquis ; "the two seem to cling together like the Siamese twins."

"Was it not," asked Bathurst, "Master Horace who, in his humorous account of his journey

from Rome to Brundusium, tells us that, at Capua, he and his friends, Macenas and Virgil, paid the price of wine for very indifferent water?"

"No; he is particular in stating that he and the illustrious 'Mantuan,' who, by-the-way, was as arrant an epicure as the polite Augustus himself, here met with some most tempting wines and viands, and so luxurious a couch that one, if not both, indulged in their siesta while Macenas betook himself to the tennis court, the resort, a century earlier, of the 'great Carthaginian.' No, it was at Beneventum that a conflagration in the kitchen of mine host threatened to consume the thrushes, and send them to bed supperless; where stones, too, were given them as an apology for bread, with a scanty supply of muddy water to aid digestion."

"Then, if such was the fare of Horace and Virgil, a truce to grumbling, good people," said the marchioness; "and for extortion, it is the customary contribution levied upon foreigners, so we may as well submit with a good grace to the irremediable."

"Never talk of extortion," said Castleton, "till you reach the 'Holy City'; the people literally defraud you, and with the most solemn, nay, with the most religious, air imaginable. You are assured of the fact, but if you do ven-

ture to bleat forth a timid remonstrance, you are awed into silence by the grandiloquent ‘sono Romano’ that immediately salutes your ear, accompanied by so majestic a deportment that you are well-nigh fooled into the weakness of begging their pardon.”

At Terracina, charmed by its wild and picturesque situation on the margin of the sea, and overshadowed by mountains, our travellers lingered a couple of days. At last they came within a dozen miles of Rome!—and, oh! those last dozen miles! Who that has traversed them can ever forget the impression left on their minds?

“Rome,” says a late eloquent writer, “herself a desert, stands in the midst of one, for such is her once blooming Campagna.”

In vain does the eye wander in search of the stately mansion of the patrician, or the cheerful cottage of the peasant. Here and there the scathed branches of a noble aqueduct, the mouldering remains of a magnificent villa, or an imperial mausoleum, shadowed by the melancholy cypress, are to be seen; but these, with the distant domes and cupolas of the “Eternal” City alone excepted, no trace of man, or of aught that marks his hand, are visible. A wild waste—a dreary strand—lies before you!

As if to mark the entrance of our travellers

into this august city by every possible access of gloom, the shades of evening darkened round them, giving to the outline of each object they passed a dim and spectral aspect, while, at intervals, the distant roar of thunder, accompanied by vivid flashes of lightning, threw a lurid glare over many a gigantic tree shivered to its base.

What a rebuke to man's pride is the desolation of this once proud city ! she who, of yore, "veiled earth with her haughty shadow !" Shorn of her glory, crownless, and enslaved, she is now but a thing to weep over !

And by whom was this renowned city laid low ? By whom were her walls levelled with the dust ?

"Behold," says Petrarch, writing to a countryman, "the relics of Rome—the image of her pristine greatness ! Neither time nor the barbaric foe can boast the merit of this stupendous destruction ; it was perpetrated by her own citizens, by the most illustrious of her sons, and your ancestors have done with the battering-ram what the Punic hero could not accomplish with the sword !"

And yet no solitary instance this of a nation's decadence. Each quarter of the globe may furnish food for mournful contemplation. Where is the mighty empire of Assyria ? Where Car-

thage, and the memorable Palmyra? "A legend and a name" are all that now survive

"to mark aright
What once was fane or palace, wall or tower."

Where is Egypt? where her eternal pyramids? They, indeed, still rear their lofty crests to kiss the sun, but they are the sole remnants of her ancient magnificence—the proudest trophy of proud Egypt is but a tomb! Where are Herculaneum and Pompeii?—whelmed 'neath the convulsive throes of nature! And where that sweetest, sunniest spot of all—Greece!—beautiful Greece!—land of the warrior, the poet, and the painter? Athens is swept from the earth!—still all is not lost—the dust of Themistocles and Sophocles is sacred still—the rent and shattered columns of the Parthenon stand but in mockery of the past, yet the name of Phidias is no unfamiliar sound within the walls of the meanest hut. Ah! genius rides triumphant on the whirlwind, imperishable as the heavens!

And now the postilion was ordered to stop, and dark, but palpable to sight, appeared the bold outline of that stupendous structure, which all, at a glance, recognized as the Coliseum. Sublime in solitary grandeur it stood, the sovereign of the scene, an emblem of the fallen majesty of Rome!

Onward once more ; and still amid the sullen gloom, the Forum, and the Capitol rose to view, the arches of Constantine and Titus, and many a storied column, and stately temple, time-worn and defaced. And now they reached the modern capital, and still all was silent and gloomy ; it might have been thought tenantless too. How changed from the wild tumult of Naples !

The Hotel di Torgo, in former days the residence of a branch of the Colonna family, received our weary travellers, but excitement, whether of joy or sorrow, is a determined enemy to repose, and, despite fatigue on the evening of their arrival, the younger members of the party were astir betimes on the ensuing morning.

“ I thought you had exhausted all your enthusiasm on the fat oyster of the Lagunes, Lady-bird,” said the marquis, as he met the blooming Florence returning from what she termed “ an exploring expedition.”

“ No, I have a tiny bit left still for the ‘ City of the Cæsars.’ ”

“ My bed-chamber window commands an almost entire view of modern Rome,” said Barthurst ; “ it is quite a second Montmartre.”

“ Does Montmartre overlook modern Rome, then ? ” inquired the marquis with a smile.

“ The belfry of the Capitol, or the Monte

Mario, will give you the best view of Rome," said Castleton.

"Then let us ride there at once," cried the marchioness. "Florence is a fearless equestrian, though a timid sailor."

"Ah! but who knows whether I shall not be a timid equestrian, too, in a seven-hilled city?"

"Oh! content ye, lady mine: the city has slipped from her seven hills. To be sure your Pegasus—for I may as well endow him with wings to keep pace with the rider's flights of fancy—may chance to stumble over some of the sublimities scattered about in such delectable confusion."

"And precipitate me into the Tiber, or down the Tarpeian—which?" asked the laughing girl.

"His wings would surely suffice to bear him up," said Bathurst, "and the Tarpeian is cleared at a bound."

"I don't know that there is much security in a pair of wings," rejoined the marchioness. "Phaeton was canted out of his papa's chariot by the immortal steeds, and, if I am not very much out in my classics, the bona fide original Pegasus threw Bellerophon."

"True, madam, but he was of earthly mould."

"My service to you, Master Charles, Mademoiselle de Malcé is not of earthly mould, then?"

"Scarcely," he returned, blushing at his own temerity ; "I confess I should tremble lest, mistaking her for a divinity, he bore her to Olympus."

How gaily the young girl laughed at this sally, but her ladyship rose at once.

"Yes, that's a very pretty fancy, Master Charles, and I dare say a goddess in a riding-habit newly imported from Paris would create a marvellous sensation in Olympus, but all this is not deciding the plain prosaic question of the whither we are to wend our steps, and who is to be our pilot through this *terra incognita* ?"

"Castleton must undertake that office," said the marquis. "It is more than twenty years since I set foot in Rome, and I remember little in it but the malaria."

"Well," returned Castleton, "for to-day at least we will not trouble you to pilot us in that direction. No need, however, to usurp the office of that harlequin of social life, a '*laquais de place*.' You will scarcely get on without one."

They went out in detachments, and on again meeting in the salon of the hotel, before dinner, they began to compare notes. Bathurst was in raptures with the pictures in the gallery of the Borghese Palace.

"Say no more," pleaded Florence, "or no argu-

ment will prevail with me to stay within another minute."

"And yet there is a sufficiently powerful one in the form of an excellent dinner which has just been announced as awaiting our good pleasure," said the marquis. The demoiselle turned indignantly away.

"It will at least suffice for rational people," added Castleton.

"Another such a sentence, sir," cried Florence, holding up her hat and gloves in playful menace, "and you are my captive."

"I have long been that," whispered he, drawing her arm fondly within his own, and following the marquis and Madame St. Géran.

With a beating heart, and a blanched cheek, Charles Bathurst gazed upon the retreating figure of the lovely girl.

The marchioness remained behind ; for almost the first time Castleton had neglected to offer her his arm. "Charles," said she, "I am left without a cavalier ; have you forgotten me ?"

"I know not that, dear madam, but it is very certain I had forgotten myself."

A tear started to the lady's eye, as she noted the faltering voice, and the tremor of the proffered arm. She had long seen, and known all.

"Oh Charles, why, why stay here ! what

madness possesses you ?" and she looked earnestly pleadingly in his face.

On the stairs he paused, " You will not betray me ?" he said flushing to the very brows.

" See that you betray not yourself."

And in another moment her ladyship was doing the honours of the table with her accustomed grace and animation. Less a novice in veiling her feelings than the unhappy and imprudent boy beside her, she chatted as gaily as though no sorrow hung its weight on her heart. On reassembling in the drawing-room, she, with the view of engaging Bathurst in some more healthful occupation than that of gazing away his soul and senses upon the affianced bride of another, drew out her tablets, and requested him to make notes of the pictures that had most struck them at the Borghese Gallery, but her little ruse failed, for Ladybird, as she was fondly called, herself bent over her chargé d'affaires and at the mention of each picture or statue raised her starry eyes to his, with such a bewitching glance of sympathetic intelligence, that matters were made worse and worse. Once indeed her taper fingers stayed his trembling ones as he was passing over, " Figure of an Angel," without having, pursuant to orders, reviewed its merits.

" You are skipping, Mr. Bathurst."

"This is not to borne," exclaimed her ladyship, stamping her foot as the youth, either urged on by love, or madness, or both, burst into a perfect rhapsody of the said statue, though from the direction of his eyes and the fire that burnt in them, it was easy to see that the angel before him, and not the lifeless marble, was his true inspiration.

"Charles! Charles! I desired you to write, not to descant. Florence, my love, I do believe his lordship is disparaging your idol, Rafaelle."

Away flew the fairy to defend the "inspired painter of Urbino," and her ladyship was rewarded for her pains by a heartrending glance from the infatuated boy.

CHAPTER IV.

Oh! there is a dream of early youth, and it never comes again.

'Tis a vision of light, of life, and of truth,
That flits across the brain ;
And Love is the theme of that early dream,
So bright, so warm, so new ;
That in all our after years, I ween that early dream we rue.

"Good Morrow, Mr. Bathurst," exclaimed the marchioness, as that gentleman entered the room in which she and Florence sat at work.

"How is it we see you now for the first time, for it is just mid-day?"

"Thanks for the compliment, madam," returned the youth, making an effort to shake off the gloom that oppressed him, "but I was sadly in arrears with my few correspondents."

"But what compliment was conveyed by my question. How do you infer that I designed one, sir?"

"By the fact that your ladyship had missed me."

"If your humility were as active as your vanity, you might have put another and less flattering construction upon it."

"I might, but humility is not my forte—I don't shine in that light."

"And pray, Master Charles, what *is* your forte, and in what light *do* you shine?"

"Why in sober truth in none, unless perhaps, occasionally, I catch a flying spark from the large floating capital of wit your ladyship has at command, and emit a transient gleam, as the dullest natures sometimes strike out a momentary ray by contact with some subtler spirit."

"Shine by reflection you would say. Well, you have called back your modesty in proper season."

"According to your ladyship's creed, modesty would be rather an encumbrance to a younger

son ; would it not materially impede the design you lately commended to me as both politic and feasible—to wit, the abduction of an heiress."

"Granted, but you have not wrought so notable an achievement this morning, have you?"

"Indeed, no ; I have, nevertheless, just dispatched a letter to a lady."

"A letter, why you have had time to write a score!"

"Perhaps Mr. Bathurst uses foolscap," archly suggested Florence.

"No, Mademoiselle de Malcé, unluckily I have none but the one I sleep in."

"Most execrable, Charles, though none the less a truism perhaps."

"Your ladyship holds out such slender encouragement to a tyro, so rarely give me credit for saying a good thing."

"May not that chance to be owing to your so rarely sinning in that direction, Master Charles? But we must beat a retreat, so bye-bye."

"Farewell then," said Florence, "we shall meet anon ;" and away she floated with her angel face and her witching smile.

Involuntarily, almost unconsciously, the youth repeated these words, simple and brief though they were.

"Oh, Lord Castleton!" he exclaimed ; "what wealth of happiness is yours ! Surely imagination never conceived, creation never till now formed a being of such entrancing sweetness, yet to love her, oh how dearly ! is all that is left me, to love her without a glimmer of hope, to behold the shrine I never dare approach, and to know that even this will shortly be denied me. Soon, very soon, all but the memory of her will have passed away—that I feel will be immortal."

Boy as Charles Bathurst had been called, boy as perhaps he yet was, his mind had far outstripped his years. He had looked on many a fair face before he beheld that radiant one that so soon for him was to be as the "lost Pleiad's, seen no more below." He had been dazzled by the lustre of many a dark eye, or touched by the softness of full many a blue one, but these had but brushed the down from the wing; the pulse had been stirred, but not the circling eddies round the heart.

More than once had the kind-hearted marquess urged his departure, honestly showing him her motive for this counsel, and with embarrassed consciousness had he listened, promising obedience ; yet he still lingered, imbibing the poison that was consuming him, powerless it should seem to take the one decisive step that

must snap asunder the fragile link that held him in this soft bondage, a bondage to which the poor enmeshed fly gave the name of friendship. Shallow conceit ! The unconsuming fires of friendship are mostly within the scope of a water-butts contents to extinguish.

Ah ! how impatient is the boy to become a man, how eager to scare away the dreams that make his all of youthful happiness, to battle with the storm of feelings and passions that belong to maturity ! Alas ! the wiser lore experience teaches comes but with added years, and the aged will tell you they would barter all they possess for the days of their light-hearted boyhood.

The very spirit of despondency had cast its demon-spell over the youth ; he would at times absent himself during the entire day, wandering alone, they knew not whither ; at others, he would shut himself in his room for hours, and in the evening order his horse and set out, no matter what the weather, leaving word that he should not return that night.

To all but Madame St. Marée this change of conduct appeared inexplicable, and certainly discourteous, and even she became, at last, a little mystified. To her anxious questioning, his only reply was an "entreaty to spare him," accompanied by such a look of anguish that she was

wounded to the soul. But this state of things could not last, the marquis was at length roused to a consideration of the matter, and resolved to speak seriously to him the very first opportunity that offered.

He was one morning listlessly stretched across the chairs in his own room, when the marquis pushed open the but half-closed door asking "If there was any admittance."

Now it is not pleasant, nor very easy to seek a confidence sedulously withheld from you, but here was no help for it.

"'Pon my word, Master Charles, you seem ominously enamoured of solitude of late. What's in the wind?"

Bathurst had started to his feet at the first words of his lordship, but stood silent and embarrassed.

The marquis took up a scribbled sheet of paper.

"Writing sonnets to your lady's beauty?"

"No, sir, I am guiltless of any such offence, I assure you."

Again the marquis stooped, and picked up the book that Bathurst had just let fall in rising. It was a volume of Petrarch.

"Oh, only reading sonnets. Well, well, Charles, this sort of thing may do for another month or so, but then, you know—with cheerful heart and

unclouded brain to Coke and Blackstone. Have you an eye to the Chancellorship, or will you content yourself to head the House of Commons?"

"I had far rather head a detachment of cavalry, sir."

"So, so!—What, 'seek the bubble reputation in the cannon's mouth?' Why, how long have you sighed for a scarlet sash and a golden epaulette?"

"Nay, sir, I care little for the soldier's trappings, but I would give all I possess for a commission in the army."

"Well, I can't quarrel with your taste. The cuirass and helmet against either the monk's cowl or the Chancellor's wig for me; but I presume it is une affaire arrangée?"

"I fear so; my father has, as you know, conceded his favourite point to me—the church—and I have no right to distress him by any further caprice."

"Oh! then it *is* a caprice?"

"Indeed no, sir; it is an ardent—most ardent thirst for—for——"

"For glory—natural enough, boy, no need to blush about it. On what possible or impossible grounds can your father object to so laudable an ambition?"

"I have never named it to him."

"Ah, there you were wrong ; but how is that ?"

"It was a matter of comparative indifference to me when I left home."

"Indeed ! and what, may I ask, has so inflamed your martial ardour since then ?"

The youth coloured, and with obvious emotion, but something of sternness, replied : "The hope of running a glorious and, I would pray Heaven, a brief career. Victory and death in the first mêlée."

At another time his lordship had laughed at this speech as a piece of the mock heroic, or at best a boy's romance, but it had been strangely out of season now. There was that in the tone, the manner, and the words of the youth, that turned jest into sad earnest. He saw that he was powerfully moved, that he appeared, in fact, to be struggling with some overmastering emotion, and although he had not the faintest clue to the mystery, he was convinced of the existence of a genuine grief ; it appeared, too, to his generous and kindly heart, that it was his duty to discover the nature of that grief, and to administer the cure, if it admitted of cure, and with one so young in years the wound could scarcely, he thought, be fathoms deep.

After the lapse of a few seconds, his lordship began ; a little out of the level road, perhaps.

"Charles, years ago, I and your father called each other friends, I may be excused, therefore, for taking some little liberty with that friend's son. Believe me, I am very far from the desire to seek a reluctant confidence when I say that something more potent than the fever of renown prompts this most extraordinary avowal, for of affection I acquit you. That you should desire that your career should be a glorious one is natural, quite natural to your age and temperament, but why it is also to be a brief one, I own myself at a loss even to conjecture."

For some minutes the youth struggled vainly for the mastery over his emotion, then turned away, and buried his face in his locked hands ; but his lordship could see that tears were forcing their way through them, while his breast heaved convulsively. He gazed upon him in absolute astonishment.

"Charles, I bid you once more remember that your father and myself were warm friends ; confide in me, my dear boy ; tell me your sorrow, I do entreat you, tell me the meaning of this agitation. Surely, surely, there can be no cause for this extreme grief."

"Spare me, sir," faltered Bathurst at last, but without looking up, "I beseech, I implore you ; I should but forfeit your esteem were I to tell you half my folly, half my madness."

A light broke through the darkness ; a sudden thought flashed upon the marquis.

Bathurst had involved himself in debt, had gamed; perhaps. Gaming was the common pastime of the Italians : the Neapolitans were more especially addicted to it. What more likely than that this young man had formed an acquaintance with the gay and unprincipled of that luxurious city ? They had tarried there several weeks, quite long enough to beggar a younger son and a minor. So totally inexperienced as he was, too. Yes, yes ; here was the solution of the riddle, this would alike account for the youth's despondency, and for his late absences from home, for he might have continued the dangerous practice in Rome. So new to the world, he had caught the prevailing epidemic. Why had he never thought of this before ? It was clear as the noonday sun that was now streaming athwart the pale brow of the miserable boy.

Well, not a moment, not a single moment longer should he be stretched upon the rack. The debts, misnamed debts of honour, no matter what their amount, should be liquidated, and that too in such a manner as to convey the least possible reproof to a sensitive and delicate mind, such as he devoutly believed his young friend's to be.

"I see it all, my dear boy, I see it all," said

his lordship, laying his hand gently on Bathurst's shoulder. "Calm yourself, we are none of us infallible. I played the fool myself when I was your age ; you have been led into this folly by a too generous and unsuspicuous nature, we will take immediate steps for the arrangement of this matter ; and now, Charles, tell me frankly the amount ?"

The young man raised his eyes to his lordship for a moment in mute surprise, in the next, he saw what surmise had been formed. A deep flush succeeded to the pallid hue that had before so alarmed the marquis, and the tears he now no longer sought to suppress, gushed forth, as seizing the hand of his generous friend, he pressed it with little less than filial fervour to his lips and to his heart.

"My dear, dear sir, never can I forget this ; never ; but—"

"No buts, my dear boy," and his lordship brushed away something very like moisture from his own eye, "you are young and inexperienced, unsuspicuous, too, very,—glad of it,—defend me from an old young man ! This will be a lesson to you, I am sure it will."

"It will indeed, sir, to the latest hour of my life ; and if ever again I am tempted to murmur at my lot, I will call to mind the generous friendship of the Marquis St. Marée, and grate-

fully own that it is not quite without its sunshine."

"Pish! don't take crotchets into your head, there is more sun than cloud in your lot. No doubt this business has made you ready to hang or shoot yourself, but although it is not for me to call that venial which is productive of great evil, and gaming is in itself a dire evil, yet the young may be pardoned their first error, their very virtue but helps to deceive them. Experience is mostly bought at a heavy cost, but if it is not at the price of honour, it need not be the death of us. Die on the battle-field if you will, no death is half so glorious, but why should it be in the first mêlée?"

Bathurst looked up with almost a smile of happiness on his face, the first genuine smile that had lived there for a weary while. "Ah, sir," he exclaimed, "death on the battle-field, or a bed of down, you have at any rate done me good, by showing me that, blessed with a true friend, it is impious to despair. But we are playing a game of cross purposes. Weak, miserably, culpably weak I am, God knows, but guiltless as yourself of the vice of gaming. I hold it in abhorrence, and trust me, I shall not henceforth incline to view it as a less enormity that you, my kind indulgent friend, would have freed me from the fruits of my folly if I had chanced to

be a gamester. Dear sir, you still look incredulous."

"No, no, my dear boy; incredulous! not at all. Then you have not gamed after all?"

"Indeed, sir, I have not."

"Why, then, Charles Bathurst, you have eased my mind of a heavier load than I could well support," and his lordship wiped the cold drops from his brow, which anxiety on his account had gathered there; "for though from tenderness to a first fault I affected to view the matter somewhat lightly, the bare idea of your becoming infected with this fearful vice occasioned me acute anguish. My dear Charles! my dear boy! this is one of the happiest moments of my life."

"And of mine! of mine, sir!" reiterated Bathurst. And each grasped the hand of the other in the cordial grip of manly friendship.

And thus they parted, his lordship about as wise when he quitted the youngster's room as when he entered it bent on surprising the secret from its inmate.

"But what the plague ails the boy, then?" he muttered; "if he is not in debt, what can have transformed him into such a wobegone knight? I made so sure his honour was involved in some gambling transaction. Thank God I was mistaken, but I am certainly no Oedipus. I don't suppose I should make much of a figure in diplo-

macy. What can ail the boy? The mere longing for the camp instead of the shady retreats of the Inner Temple cannot have wrought such a change. He's right, what's a seat on the Bench, or in Parliament, compared to the soldier's honours? Better lead a detachment of brave fellows than drone through life a sleek justice of the peace. I had rather be a cornet in a crack regiment than Speaker of the House of Commons. Why, a pair of colours were a less costly bauble than a counsellor's wig. I must write to Colonel Bathurst, he must have interest in the army; if not, I have. I suppose his pride is so centred in his heir, that the younger off-shoots are left to get along the railroad of life as best they may. I'll speak to Castleton about the boy, he is an especial favourite with Castleton; he is in high esteem, too, with the fair Florence. Ah! can it be? No, he could scarcely be such a donkey, yet the maiden is wondrous fair, and he;—but no,—he must be demented to fall headlong in love with a fiancée. No, it can't be love, yet the symptoms are marvellously of that complexion." Thus ended his lordship's soliloquy; of the nature of Charles Bathurst's we may form a partial surmise by the results, for it is certain that he resumed at least a semblance of his former cheerfulness.

Perhaps he dreaded the further scrutiny of

his lordship, or, grateful for the affectionate interest he had betrayed, determined to let him see he could be grateful. He rode, walked, and chatted with the marchioness whenever she invited him, and that was pretty frequently, for she essayed by every means within her power to divert his mind from the one theme she knew 'twere worse than madness to indulge.

How far beyond all ordinary calculation is the friendship of a good and sensible woman, how entirely devoid of egotism ; even when her own heart aches beneath its load of anguish, the whole energies of her nature are exhausted in furtherance of the end she has in view.

It was impossible that Charles Bathurst could be untouched by so much kindness, nor being touched by it, that he could resolve on making no effort towards the mastery of a weakness that, persisted in, must banish him from his present society.

He did make the effort, and the proud and grateful smiles of the marchioness were his reward ; perhaps not the sole reward. A stubborn foe is inclination opposed to reason ; there is some glory in mastering it.

CHAPTER V.

Requiescat in pace.

LETTERS from England awaited Lord Castleton on his arrival at Rome ; one conveyed the intelligence of young Selwyn's death more than a fortnight back.

"Forbear," wrote Herbert, "yet a brief while longer, I conjure you, to press the consideration of your friend's just claims upon the bereaved, however crime-stained father. Over the cold remains of one beloved child the grave has scarcely closed. Leave him unmolested to his deep of anguish. But why do I urge this as though I were addressing the most inhuman instead of the most exalted of men, perhaps too exalted for frail humanity ? But bear with him, Stratford, if you meet. 'Bend not the bruised reed.' An old man crushed beneath the two-fold burden of sin and sorrow, is an object of commiseration, ay, even of reverence, if remorse live there. If we would amend the sinner we must pardon the sin."

The chafed spirit of Castleton could hold out no longer. "Pardon!" he exclaimed, with a curl of his haughty lip, "I could well-nigh say with the Doge's noble wife, 'Pardon is for men,

and not for reptiles !' pray heaven I meet not this man till the true heir be in possession of his long-defrauded rights."

A communication was forthwith made to young Langley, or, as he may now be called, Selwyn, on the matter of Malgrove's dispatch, and Castleton was then closeted with Mdme. St. Géran, in whose breast sorrow and joy alternated ; for if, on the one hand, joy at the promised recognition of her grandson's claims took precedence, she had tears for the early doom of the heretofore presumed heir of Old Court.

By the advice of Castleton, Everard Selwyn awaited the summons of his father to England. It was not long delayed.

CHAPTER VI.

What gem hath dropp'd and sparkles o'er his chain ?
The tear more sacred shed for others' pain,
That starts at once—bright, pure, from Pity's mine,
Already polish'd by the hand divine.

BYRON.

" 'PON my word, her ladyship makes most formidable invasions upon your freedom, Bathurst,'

exclaimed the marquis one morning after his wife had challenged him as her cavalier of the day. "Parbleu, but the age progresses with a vengeance. I thought cicisbeism had been on the decline."

"It is in Naples," rejoined her ladyship, "but we are in Rome, and you know the adage, 'At Rome do as Rome does.' Now, Charles, my cachemire,—another fold on this side. Bien, you have arranged it à ravir; my gloves and handkerchief. Mille graces; now your arm. Au revoir, mon ami," and waving her hand to her husband, she quitted the room with her companion.

"Very dégagé indeed. Florence, my love, how am I to be avenged upon my runaway wife and this modern Paris?"

"Nay," said Castleton; "if her ladyship has appointed him to all the honours of a cicisbeo, you have only to make him a very low bow, and——" he paused and smiled.

"Play the cicisbeo to another lady," said the marquis, taking up the sentence.

"Exactly," laughed Florence, offering him her hand, and furtively glancing at her guardian.

"Castleton, may I seal to such a bond?"

"With all my heart, provided I am not excluded from participation in the office."

"Nay, I appeal against that innovation.

'Two suns cannot shine in the same hemisphere,'
nor has one lady a right to two knights."

"Under all ordinary circumstances I cordially
subscribe to your doctrine."

"No doubt you do; not a question on the
matter."

"But, as you are about signing a bill of
exclusion for my especial behoof, I beg to remind
you that according to all the established rules
of cisisbeism, the lady is equitably entitled to
a couple of attendant satellites."

"That's a master-stroke, Castleton; you'll be
a Talleyrand yet, in spite of your friend Her-
bert's prediction. What, you would not, then,
like that churl Othello,

"Suffocate a wife not twenty,
Because she had a cavalier servente!"

"Well, I suppose we must enlist him, my
love."

"Je m'y rends," returned the demoiselle, with
an air of sufferance, and she ran away to equip
for their expedition.

In conformity with the fashion of the day
Florence and Bathurst each kept a kind of
glossary or note-book, and an hour in the evening
was generally dedicated to entries therein of the
treasures of art they had visited during the day.
They were thus engaged on this evening.

Bathurst had been idle of late, but under the "reform" system he was so heroically bent on pursuing, he now recommenced his task, filling in the hiatus with memoranda from his fair companion's journal.

"Where are you, Mr. Bathurst? Ah! I see; in the Vatican."

Truly she was near enough to see, so near that her light breath fanned his cheek, and sent the life-blood mantling there to curdle round his heart.

"Yes," he stammered, "in the Vatican."

"But it was to be poetry! and you are not writing original matter."

"Alas, no! I am not coxcomb enough to attempt anything so rash.

"The zeal of fools offends at any time,
But most of all the zeal of fools in rhyme.'

I can't invent."

"But you can think?"

"To little purpose, I believe; any way I can give thought small utterance."

"But, Mr. Bathurst, 'la choix des pensées est l'invention,' so says La Bruyère; and with the glories of the Vatican in your mind's eye, inspiration can scarcely fail you."

"Not if I had a scintillation of genius."

"But you have taste. Taste is selection.

Genius is defined as creation ; the creation lies before you. I accord you just five minutes in which to invoke the muses ; yes, oh yes, poetry ; don't look aghast."

The smiling girl resumed her seat, and looked at her watch as her too willing victim bowed his head over his work. Genius ! Inspiration ! Why his mind was chaos.

" Shall I transcribe as you indite ? I have a quill from the tail of Juno's peacock."

Their eyes met. She smiled, he sighed, then smiled too.

" Your time is up ; say, votary of Apollo, what is it to be,

" ' Blank verse or rhyme,
Doggrel, or measure more sublime ? '

" Neither to-night, so it please you, fair lady," broke in the marchioness. " Charles, this letter is for you."

Yes, the letter was for him, and the purport of that letter sufficed to blanch the cheek and unsteady the hand of its reader.

" What is it ? "

" Only a note of recall, dear madam."

It was a summons home, and urged immediate attention to it ; indeed the time fixed for his return left him little more than a couple of days' stay with his friends.

"Well, but my dear boy," said the good-natured marquis, after hearing this passage read from his father's letter, "surely the delay of a week or so can make no great difference?"

Bathurst's countenance brightened in an instant.

"My dear Louis," said Madame St. Marée, turning a look of grave remonstrance on her husband, "think how pained his father would be by any display of unwillingness to return to his home, after so long an absence too; you must see this, my dear Charles."

Bathurst's eyes rested on the open letter, those of Florence were bent with a half-sorrowful expression on him. This, it is true, he rather felt than saw, but it sufficed to impart so much of wavering to his mind that he returned no answering word of acquiescence to this appeal. None better than Bathurst knew what course he ought to adopt, but the courage, the moral courage to resolve upon it was wanting.

The marchioness saw the conflict, and prompt to throw additional weight into the scale on the side of duty, turned to Lord Castleton and asked him "if he did not think it would be ill-advised in their young friend to extend his stay beyond the given time."

"There cannot be two opinions on that point," he returned, "and deeply as I feel we shall all

regret Bathurst's loss, I confess I should be disappointed in him if he were to stay."

The youth's indecision was at an end.

"Then," said he, forcing a ghostly smile, "I must brace up my courage to bid you all farewell;" and unable it would seem to add another word, he abruptly quitted the room.

A general expression of heartfelt regret followed the closing of the door. Charles Bathurst had so endeared himself to the circle by his engaging manners and the sweetness of his disposition, that his approaching departure cast a gloom over them all.

The next day, the last of his stay, passed as most last days do pass, in vain efforts on all sides to appear the thing they were not. Affected cheerfulness is the most melancholy of all counterfeits. The next—and at an early hour the chaise that was to bear him away was at the door of the hotel.

He was seated on one of his trunks when he was summoned, sobbing like a child.

Ah! the grave may shake their heads, the worldly may smile, and the cynic may sneer; but there are no tears so wild, so bitter, or so heart-searching as those we shed in our spring-tide over the destruction of a first most passionate attachment.

In vain would philosophy, in vain would

holier reasoning attempt to "teach our trial patience." To our sense there is but one beloved face on earth, and that withdrawn, our future is a blank ; the world a dreary void, wherein we would not, if we could, find consolation.

It may be urged that these feelings are evanescent, that some newer passion will soon replace the old ; it may be so, but we do not believe it at the time, and how many instances of unshaken loyalty go to disprove it as a general axiom. And then that second passion, what is it but an effigy of the first ? We love, but not as of yore. We would give all the hopes of the present for the heart-burnings of the past, even while we smile perchance at deathless affection and breaking hearts.

A kindly hand on his shoulder roused Bathurst from his tumult of grief. Ashamed of being caught, like a boy, in tears, he turned away his head.

" You must think me a perfect baby, Lord Castleton, but this parting with so many dear friends quite unmans me."

" No need to proffer an excuse for that which so endears you to us," returned his lordship with an affectionate pressure of the hand ; " Charles Bathurst has not now to learn the estimation in which he is held by those who

share his grief at this separation, however much for his sake they may strive to suppress it."

Thus reconciled to himself, and soothed by Castleton's warm sympathy, he hastened downstairs.

His anxious eye quickly perceived that Florence was not in the room.

" You will be late, my dear Charles ; little wisdom in lengthening out painful moments," said the marquis.

" But must I go, sir, without one farewell to Mademoiselle de Malcé ?"

" My dear boy, to be sure not ; why, where is she ? Oh, I see her through the glass door. Now don't be a second, and I will make sure that your travelling cloak is not forgotten."

As the youth entered Florence held out a trembling hand to him. What would he not have given to have raised it to his lips ! this he durst not do, but he gazed into her face as if his heart were breaking ; and so it was.

" God for ever bless you, dear Mr. Bathurst," said she, in sweet, pitying accents. As she withdrew the hand a tear she could no longer keep back fell on it.

He saw no more, heard no more ; insensible to everything but his devotion to the beautiful being before him, whom he beheld perhaps for

the last, the very last time, he seized again that little hand, its polished surface yet wet with the tear she had shed for him—for him ! —ah ! therein lay the rapture and the peril—and covered it with kisses ; then, without a word, rushed from the room and threw himself into the chaise.

At the door stood the marquis and Castleton. As the chaise drove off they waved their hands with many a kindly wish, but all was unheeded by its wretched inmate. “God for ever bless you, dear Mr. Bathurst,” he continued to repeat ; and the words were treasured in his memory, and the tear that accompanied them embalmed in his heart, long after both were forgotten by the fair girl, who was nevertheless enlightened in that last interview upon the tone and temper of the youth’s feelings towards her ; and perhaps a less noble nature than Lord Castleton’s might have been conscious of a shade of uneasiness as he noted the blush which never failed to crimson the cheek of his betrothed at the mention of the youth’s name, or whenever she even faintly recalled to mind the anguish of his mute but eloquent farewell, and though no shadow of love mingled with her sentiments towards him, there was yet enough of the woman in her composition to whisper to her

heart that she did not regard him with less interest since the discovery of his devotion to her.

CHAPTER VII.

And now farewell to Italy !

AND now they turned their backs upon "Imperial" Rome, and Castleton and his ward wandered by the borders of the classic Arno, or amid the deeper shades of Vallambrosa—wandered for hours unshackled by the cold ceremonials of form, or the hollow dictates of fashion, drinking in the delicious sense of a happiness that might almost have been pronounced unalloyed ; or, if with Florence a passing shadow, sacred to a father's memory, dimmed the radiance of her laughing brow, it was transient as the gloom of the skies above her ; Castleton, it should seem, was master of the spell wherewith to chase it, for love can throw its own rich colours over all, and make all beautiful and bright.

And these moments ! so fraught with interest to both, so fondly lingered over, were they ever forgotten ? Ah, no !—but, alas ! they were fated to be remembered but as phantoms of departed joys. Amid the brilliant but tumultuous scenes of fashionable life they were recurred

to as linked with recollections a thousand and a thousand times dearer than aught that that cold, hollow world could offer in their stead.

As yet, however, no cloud had passed athwart the heaven of *her* mind. She beheld the sunshine, and dreamed not of the shade. A long bright vista strewed with roses lay before her—what recked she of the thorns the treacherous foliage concealed? Nature's volume was open at a page that revealed only the tender hues of love, and hope, and joy, and content with these, she sought not to turn the leaves, which like the opening of Pandora's box might have betrayed to her startled gaze evils of which she had as yet conceived but a faint idea from the realms of fiction. She had yet to learn that "truth is stranger than fiction," that the lessons experience teaches are often sadder than any which imagination can portray.

But the fair white walls of the Etruscan city
woo us from these reflections.

"Of all the fairest cities of the earth.
None is so fair as Florence."

So sings the "poet of Italy," and who shall gainsay such an authority?

As the shrine of the noblest works of art in the world, the city of the Medicis cannot fail to excite an interest the most profound in the

minds of men, and yet in itself, in taste and elegance, Florence must yield to the Neapolitan capital ; in the grandeur of its ancient monuments, to Rome ; nor is there to be seen or felt at Florence that nameless charm that belongs to Venice. It wants its moonlit sea, its romance, its mystery, its silence, and its life ;—above all, its Palladian palaces, for the houses built in the simple but heavy style of Tuscan architecture invest it with an undoubted character of gloom, while the streets are as narrow—ay, as narrow as those of the “City of the Cæsars,” and the vaunted beauties of the silvery Arno are strangely dimmed by the numberless embankments that have been lately raised to prevent inundations during the wet season. But yet that Ponte della Trinita which crosses the Arno, with its elegant elliptic arches and graceful statues, is the most fairy-like structure in all Italy ; then the Ducal palace, somewhat rude of build it is true, yet grand and imposing ; then, too, her mountains, and her skies, her vineyards and her olive groves !

Yes, Florence is worthy of her reputation, the unrivalled queen of literature and the arts—the “Athens” of Italy.

What mighty names—a part of her very existence—are linked with hers ! what consummate spirits have swayed her destinies ! We speak not

of her more than sovereign rulers—her merchant dukes—but of the countless throng of god-like souls that have bequeathed to her a dower of immortality.

And they who made the bequest—where are they?—their mortal remains? Go visit their Westminster Abbey—Santa Croce—and of the solemn void ask that question,—ask where lies the hallowed dust of the “father of Tuscan poetry,” and the Florentine with a blush of shame will point to “Ravenna’s hoary shore” where “honour’d sleeps th’ immortal exile!”

Petrarch, Boccaccio—they too sleep afar. “Ungrateful Florence!” Even thus art thou apostrophized by our great English bard: nor causelessly. Yes; spirits such as these did indeed bequeath to thee imperishable fame; but of this be sure—that imperishable as is that fame, will be the memory of its requital.

* * * * *

Summer had given place to autumn, autumn indeed had scattered its crimson leaves before the breath of winter’s winds, and the marchioness began to talk a little, and *think* a great deal, of her cosy quiet home in Dauphiné, while Castleton’s dream of bliss was threatened with invasion from his old enemy Herbert. That it was expedient to return to the “Fatherland”

none knew better than himself, but like Charles Bathurst, he something lacked the courage to up and away. True, his return to England involved no actual separation from his ward, but oh ! the immeasurable difference of his position there in regard to her, when she would no longer be protected by a host of loving and honourable friends, where he could only see her at stated and stinted periods, see her in very truth as his ward, rather than his affianced wife.

Yes, Lord Castleton dreaded the change from this hourly communion of heart and soul far more than did Florence herself, for, with his deeper insight into that hollow globe, yclept social life, he better realized all that that change was likely to involve.

In England the life of a woman of condition is mainly an artificial one ; she speaks, thinks, moves, but at the supreme dictum of fashion.

But would Florence de Malcé become a fashionist ? Castleton dared not ask himself that question ; he gazed into her innocent eyes, and fancied those eyes from out their blue depths answered "never !" and he tried to be satisfied with that mute eloquence.

When once the idea of home has taken root in the breast of the wanderer, few impediments are sufficiently potent to keep him long away from it, and so all was soon in active operation

for the restoration of the several parties to their respective habitations. Castleton, however, strong in his divine right of guardianship, claimed to accompany Madame St. Géran and his ward to La Garde.

Dear and venerable shades ! how fondly were you once more greeted by the last scion of her race !—how warm and loyal was the welcome that awaited her in the home of her childhood ! Alas ! why was her stay there so brief ?"

In all matters that concerned the domestic economy at La Garde, the friend and protectress of the orphan heiress, Maman St. Géran, was pretty well as ignorant and as helpless as the heiress herself. At the château, where she had it is true presided as mistress, all the practical part of the management of the household had lain in the hands of the butler and the house-keeper, and so far as any amendment was likely to be worked out under the superintendence of Madame St. Géran, it might as well be left in similar hands in England. But the evil did not stop here ; it unfortunately happened that the good old lady was even less qualified to act in the capacity of chaperone to a very young girl moving in the highest ranks of society.

It was not that she was wanting in the grace and breeding peculiar to the gentlewoman that she was unfitted for the task, but purely from a

simplicity of character, *sui generis*, and which her life of total seclusion had not helped to expand.

Then there was her great age and fast growing infirmities. And these two—the sickly octogenarian, and the child-woman—“babes in the wood,” were about to be launched on the world’s wide ocean, and left to play their parts in its motley masquerade.

But, say our readers, “Madlle. de Malcé has a guardian, one selected by the tenderest of fathers.” True—she has—and he is a man pre-eminently distinguished among his fellow-men for inflexible virtue; one whose lofty and stern morality had gained him an almost stoic repute. But then, this man had not yet numbered nine-and-twenty winters, and in lieu of the white hairs and wrinkled brow and bent figure, nearly always the distinctive features of the guardian of a young and lovely and unwedded dame, the Earl of Castleton might have served as a model for an Alcibiades.

To crown all, this lord-warden of the golden apple of the Hesperides held also the prospective appointment of husband to the Hebe, and that title would be sure to draw all eyes to the knight as well as the lady.

The clique round St. James’s would no sooner receive the report of this dual alliance than

they would prepare to greet it with the small shot of their malice and their mirth.

It is marvellous what an amount of mischief may be propagated by the ingenious machinery of hint and innuendo—the pretty artillery of “nods and becks and wreathed smiles.” The high and generous nature of Castleton could not conceive one half of these things.

Great minds, as a rule, are singularly free from the meanness of suspicion.

In the list of his lordship's failings, and he had not a few, splendid prodigality was certainly one of the most conspicuous, and never had it been more profusely displayed than on the present occasion, in relation to a fitting establishment for his ward on her arrival in England. Whether as the last representative of the de Malcés, or as the future Countess of Castleton, he desired that it should be on a scale of unequalled magnificence. The orders transmitted to La Marre were to that effect.

“I think, my dear Herbert,” he wrote from La Garde, “we may safely trust that prince of upholsterers, and ne plus ultra of scoundrels, with all the required appointments for the house you fix upon. With my carte blanche in his hand the rogue will allow few scruples to impede his progress to profit. But to your own exquisite taste I confide the selection of the choicest

works of art that wealth or interest may purchase, for, need I add, that you too have carte blanche to fill a gallery or adorn a boudoir.

"Apropos of the boudoir, for their lives suffer not La Marre or his myrmidons to set print of their sacrilegious foot within that sanctuary. Lady Malgrove or Constance (but Constance, I think you say, is away) will look to that, will she not? Tell her I confide this special bijou to her charge.

"Ah, Herbert, I could transmit some of the sculptured sublimities by which we have lately been surrounded to England for the adornment of my darling's home; her native taste, refined by culture, could so well appreciate them; but even if the national pride of the Italian (and I wish there were more of it) did not militate against the sacrilege, I have always so fiercely denounced the practice of traffic of such treasures, that I were a double traitor to attempt a reversal of my own sentence. I have the true Byronian horror of chafing for these plundered antiques, and yet I am but 'indifferent honest'; to render the casket worthy the gem it will enshrine, I would perhaps 'do something more than may become a man.' Nous verrons. Any way, 'An' you love me, Hal,' spare not the Castleton coffers—the golden ore is useless in the mine. I would

bankrupt each and all, so they might minister to the happiness of my soul's idol.

"Oh, sweet but anxious toil! to bear the burden of another's life for coming weal or coming woe; for look you, Herbert, from the moment we shall set foot on British ground, the vaunted land of freedom, our state of vassalage begins. My ward travels in one carriage, I in another. Social this, and pleasant as a preliminary step. Mais que faire? If the guardian legally appointed by her father, tried and trusted by her friends, ventured to take his seat in the same vehicle with her, all town would in the space of twenty-four hours ring with it as a breach of etiquette, and in less than as many more, the breach of etiquette would have swelled into a high crime and misdemeanour.

"Do you know, Herbert, I do abhor this harpy throng of censors, who, with the cant of decorum on their lips, let loose their malice on the innocent and unwary. Yes; pour out the vials of your wrath on me, but deny it if you can, that calumny is at high pressure within the courtly circles of St. James's.

"Talk of statecraft, why it needs the collective wisdom of the senate-house to bear upon this apparently simple but really superperplexing point, etiquette. Yet she, my gentle, guileless love, understands nothing of all this.

She fears no ill, because she knows it not; and may she never know it, Herbert. I would not that the lightest down were brushed from off her angel purity; I would not have her raise the painted veil that hides this dark charnel-house; would not that she plucked one rose-tinted leaf that bedecks the hollow, joyless world of which she is so soon, alas! to become a denizen. Oh, that I might bear her hence before her ear is polluted by the poisonous incense that will be poured into it, for oh, how bewilderingly beautiful she is!

" And how, think you, will she receive this incense? Will it pain and startle her ingenuous nature, or steep her senses in a new Elysium? Will she accept the homage as her born due, or shrink with blushing sensitiveness from the worshipper? Herbert, every pulse within me beats as I ask myself this question. And this forest flower! my own affianced bride! to whose pilotage is she to be entrusted to guide her through this maze, where vice, decked in the trappings of virtue, stands on tiptoe for its prey? Why, Herbert, the lamb that raises its innocent head to meet the uplifted knife of its destroyer is not more unsuspecting of wrong than is the simple-minded creature appointed to this trust. It would be difficult to determine whether of the twain, the aged matron, or the

child-pupil, were the least fitted for intercourse with a world to which each is an equal stranger.

"Well, my watch and ward, ceaseless as my love, will surely avert all danger.

"Thank God we meet soon, till then I waive all thanks for your generous advocacy of young Selwyn's cause, for I have ceased to style him Langley. Fearlessly we pledge ourselves to abide the issue ; it is in your hands, and who may resist the resistless ?

"By-the-way, before we come to a pitched battle, I may as well correct an error in your chronology. You are wrong, incontestibly wrong, my friend, in your data touching the term of my exile. You may knock out of your calculation just three weeks five days. *My* calendar all to nothing against yours, for accuracy. Love is my chronicler, and you know, or should know, what saith Rosalind touching the breaking of a thousandth part of a minute in these recondite matters. Trust me, no day has passed unrecorded by some memorial from out the golden treasury of love, while you, master philosopher, still contrive, how, Heaven knows, to keep your wings unsinged.

"Well, well, my term of self-exile draws to a close. I will not ask forgiveness for its extension till I present to the truest of friends my heart's treasure, then, Herbert, I may challenge

him to mortal combat if he dispute the validity
of the claim preferred by

"CASTLETON THE WANDERER."

CHAPTER VIII.

He had a great estate,
And kept a brave old house at a hospitable rate.

OLD SONG.

PASSING over all those farewells that so sorely wring the hearts of the loyal and the loving, we will change the scene from her cherished home of La Garde to Madlle. de Malcé's mansion in Belgravia, where, throughout, the most exquisite taste prevails. All is worthy of the patrician descent of the fair proprietress, and of the opulence of her guardian, for her fortune had never supplied one-half the treasures that mansion enshrines.

One suite of rooms in particular is distinguished by excelling taste and splendour; these Castleton tells his ward are sacred to her sole use. The central apartment, supported by costly pillars of Oriental marble, wreathed with the most elaborate sculptures, defies all criticism. Rare old pictures adorn the walls of the next; statues, too, which might challenge competition with the choicest specimens of the

antique, fill the niches, and—but why enlarge on this theme? The interior adornments of the mansions of the great are casts from the same mould, differing only on points of taste, for the sole proprietorship of the mines of Golconda could not supply this last desideratum.

* * * * *

And now Florence is folded to the faithful bosom of Herbert Malgrove; folded in a deep and dear embrace, for not as Madlle. de Malcé, not as the heiress of La Garde, but as the betrothed of the most beloved of friends is she regarded. As he presses a brother's fondest kiss upon the upturned face of the orphan girl, Castleton gazes upon them with eyes blinded by tears. "How have I deserved this—thus doubly blest?" he murmurs.

And soon in company with dear Mamma St. Géran, Florence is welcomed to the Rectory House by the widowed Lady Malgrove, and with her, esquired by Castleton and Herbert, she treads the stately halls of brave old Oatlands, the birthplace, and always the most cherished home, of her guardian.

And how proudly the owner of that princely domain leads her from one magnificent suite of apartments to another, till they reach the picture gallery, where, occupying nearly half of one

entire side, are ranged the ancestors of that proud race—founders of a long long line of men made illustrious by their virtues.

With an emotion that was barely controllable, Castleton paused before a curtained picture. He touched the spring, and a fine whole-length of the late earl seemed literally starting from out the canvas, so life-like was it.

As the tear-clouded eyes of the gentle girl rested on it, Stratford turned to his friend—

“Oh that he were here, Herbert, to bless and to protect her !”

A silent pressure of the hand was the sole reply ; words were worse than vain.

And what sweetness ! What benignity were discernible in this portrait of Lord Castleton ! Though like a true woman Florence gazed the more intently to discover in it a resemblance to her lover. And it did resemble the present earl, though goodness rather than greatness was its dominant expression. There was the same broad, thoughtful brow as the son's, but none of its pride—the mouth wore the smile of the son, but had nothing of the scorn sometimes seen to distort his. But the eyes—the large, brown, almond-shaped eyes—were all Stratford Castleton's ; they were peculiar to the race, and were eloquent of goodness and intellect combined.

Side by side with this picture was a whole-

length of the countess ; that too was curtained. A trembling hand was laid upon the cord—one as trembling arrested it—

“ Dear Stratford, no ! another time.”

Instinctively the young girl had divined whose was the veiled portrait—had surmised too whose thoughtful hand had covered both.

Pressing the little fairy fingers to his lips, Castleton dropped the cord.

“ Herbert ! is she not an angel ?”

And the long retinue of servants that graced and glorified old Oatlands—staunch and sturdy as the forest oaks that threw their venerable shade around those time-honoured walls—how proud were you to welcome back the long-absent heir. And with what admiring eyes did they gaze upon the beautiful and blushing girl leaning upon their lord's arm, who ever and anon smiled with such seducing sweetness as she bent her graceful head in answer to their deep salutation ; scarcely could they restrain their welcome to her too, and scarcely had they need of such restraint, for Lord Castleton was little heedful to disguise from these faithful retainers of his house the relation in which he stood to her. If he did not in all form present her to them as their future lady, he in no way shrunk from a tacit acknowledgment that thus it would be at no distant day.

Nothing of pride in the remotest degree characterized the Earl of Castleton's demeanour towards the members of his household. His lofty bearing he could not help, but in all else he was frank, gracious—even winning. He was proud of these aged servitors, born on the soil, and grown gray on it—all his boyish memories, when Herbert and he made the old woods ring with their merry voices, were linked with them, and like those old forest trees on whose mouldering barks he had as a boy so often carved his name, each one wore the familiar aspect of a friend. It had not been Oatlands without them, he had not loved it so well if they had not been there to welcome the wanderer back from his pilgrimage. And they, those gray-headed men, and their sons, and their sons' sons, they loved the noble and gracious young earl, and reverenced him in the triple character of man, master, and friend, and to a man they would, any one of them, have died for him. "Love and loyalty" might well be the family motto.

And with all his faults, Lord Castleton deserved their fealty. He might sometimes be severe in his judgments; stern on the rampant vices of the day he unquestionably was; but he had nothing but gentleness and forbearance with these humble followers of his race. For somewhat of the love and reverence borne him by his

tenantry Malgrove, it must be owned, was responsible, who doing all good in the proprietor's name, never suffered enthusiasm to flag. If men adored Herbert, Herbert took care they should not be far behindhand in their worship of his friend.

And joyous was the Christmas that year among the tenantry of Oatlands—joyous as in olden days; and oh! how proud and happy—ay, happy in spite of his heart's grief—was the rector of Oatlands.

"Why," he asked, "had he suffered an hour's anxiety about his friend? Could he ever be less than the best and noblest of men? Look at him now dispensing hospitality to hundreds within and without the pale of his own lands."

Ah, Herbert Malgrove! if you had conscientiously weighed your own merits in the opposite scale to your friend's, you would soon have discovered which had first kicked the beam.

No matter; bonfires blazed, sheep and oxen were roasted whole, and sparkling October filled the glass of every living soul—filled it to overflowing as Lord Castleton, at the close of one of the several entertainments given to his tenantry in the private grounds of Oatlands, wound up an animated but very brief address with these ever welcome words—

"My very good friends and tenants, you will

for the next year rent your own farms, in short, be your own landlords."

His lordship sat down amidst enthusiastic cheering, but was presently again on his feet.

"Hear ! hear ! silence ! order ! His lordship is going to speak."

"Yes ; I want to remind you that no '*play*' can get on without a prompter ; I take shame to myself in acknowledging that *mine*, which I hope, as successive years roll on, to hear greeted with many encores, had never seen the light of day without one."

All eyes turned from the Royal David to Jonathan.

His lordship's whole countenance beamed with animated grateful pleasure as he laid his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Yes ; I see you recognize *my* prompter—the prompter to most of my good deeds."

The cheers were now deafening, for the name of Malgrove was blended with the earl's.

It was true that Herbert had made the suggestion respecting the rents of his lordship, for he knew how warmly he would respond to it.

"With all my heart, Herbert," was the reply. "Just tell the good fellows so, will you ?"

"I will do nothing of the kind ; tell them so yourself, it's your business."

"But, my dear Herbert——"

But Herbert was out of hearing.

Yes, many a sparkling glass that night, and for nights to come, was quaffed to the health of the generous landlord, and many a one beside to that of the bonnie bird with the winsome smile whom they prayed might lure that generous lord to tarry long among them instead of starting off to foreign parts—"coming Ireland over them." Why, they had not been so blithe since the good old earl was taken from them. Then, too, his reverence—"God Almighty bless him!"—began to wear the old old smile again; it had come back with his lordship.

No, the fires in the old halls had not burned so brightly for many a long day. And still was there one thing wanting—the sight of one fair face that had been wont at this festive season to shed its light upon every homestead in and near. Yes, the young "lady of Beechgrove" was sorely missed, for though her thoughtful bounty had anticipated the wants of the poor and infirm for many a league distant, her grave, sweet face and her kindly words were no longer there to soothe and cheer.

Castleton, too, loudly bemoaned the absence of the truant, yet more for his ward's sake than his own; while Herbert from his inmost soul thanked heaven that she was away. He had not yet acquired fortitude to see her unmoved;

but that were nothing; pain to himself were the last thing that had disturbed his unselfish heart; but how look calmly on, and see *her* suffer? that were indeed to fill his cup of bitterness to overflowing, for of the depth and tenderness of her affection for Castleton he scarcely dared to entertain a doubt. His indifference, his coldness, she might have schooled her heart to support, but how witness the tokens of his wild idolatry for another? No! he rejoiced in his inmost soul at her absence, but he was the only living being that did do so.

Well, all things in this mundane sphere have an end, even the Christmas festivities at Oatlands closed in at last.

The opening of Parliament banished the earl from his paradise. If Oatlands had been dear to him before the sojourn of his betrothed, it had now, and in the bright future, acquired a sanctity in his eyes, for all around spoke to him of her in mute but eloquent language, a language which only a lover may interpret it is true, but lovers at the apex of the disorder are said to draw largely upon the imagination, and if that can satisfactorily supply the place of reality, they were surely unwise to flout the bright Egeria.

And this bright Egeria; where was she after the departure of her guardian? Did she still

haunt the forest glades of the old place ? For awhile, yes ; but at length she, too, prepared for flight. The beginning of March saw her, under the joint guardianship of Madame St. Géran and Lady Malgrove, established in Eaton Place, and Herbert was once again alone, for he would not rest till he had prevailed with Emily to accompany Florence to the gay city. Young Edward Malgrove to be sure was left, and would sorely miss mamma, but then he was so proud of being left to take care of Uncle Herbert, whom he seemed to love with a most clinging love.

Now the widowed Lady Malgrove would prove a very safe, if not a very able, chaperone to a young lady on her entrance into the world. She was pretty much as ignorant of its machinery as her protégée it is true ; but this had scarcely been a disadvantage. No need to plunge headlong into the whirlpool, and intoxicate the senses, ere the season has well begun. The fates, however, were adverse. Unhappily for all parties, Emily, who had tenderly attached herself to Florence, was, after the lapse of a very few weeks, compelled by severe indisposition to shorten her visit in town, and went soon after with her little boy to the coast.

This was a cruel disappointment to the orphan, and one yet more deeply deplored by her guar-

dian, who more than ever solicitous, as the season advanced, to see his ward under safe and efficient guidance, now took the fatal resolution of formally introducing her to Lady Graham, the most severely chaste of Roman matrons, as it pleased her his lordship should esteem her. Yet it was a mistake, a lamentable mistake, this introduction, on the part of the Earl of Castleton, for the Lady Graham—but her ladyship, whether as a chaste matron or a clever intrigante, is far too important a personage to make her appearance at the fag end of a chapter.

Again ; Lord Castleton has to prepare his ward for the momentous interview. It is the close of the day, Florence is alone in her boudoir, that fairy boudoir on which the refined taste of Herbert and her guardian have been so profusely lavished. And the temple is worthy the divinity—that loving, artless girl who now stands there on the tip-toe of expectation. She hears *his* step, and her impatience is not to be restrained. As yet the frost-work of ceremony is so little understood by her that she springs forward to open the door.

Happily for her future credit as a denizen of the world of fashion, the well-trained groom of the chamber anticipates her by a single second ; it is flung wide on its hinges, and Lord Castleton is formally announced.

The ecstasy of meeting over, she gaily runs over her engagement list: "One, two, three; only one night free this week, I do declare."

Her guardian sighs a little sigh. A smile plays round her ruby lip, but the dancing light in her eye is suddenly quenched. "Ah, Stratford! for all this I shall never, never be a woman of fashion."

"Pray heaven my darling prove a true prophet! Yet these weary, weary months! Would that they were past!"

Castleton turned away, moved as he always was at any reference to the term of their long engagement. Presently a soft hand wooingly sought his.

"What is it you fear, Stratford?"

"Everything;—and nothing!"

"Then nothing can come of nothing."

"Ah, my precious one! the giddy world, abuse it as we may, has wondrous fascination for the novice."

"And do you think I shall find aught in this giddy world which can even for a moment dim the remembrance of those sweet hours when you, Stratford, were the world to me? Ah, believe it not!"

How eagerly was that hand, released from its hiding-place, pressed to the beating, anxious

heart of her lover, anxious with fond solicitude for her.

"Have I not my birds, my flowers, my books, dear Mamma St. Géran, and—and you, Stratford, dearer than all? Oh, nothing in the glittering circles of fashion can charm like these!"

Very tenderly, but very mournfully, Castleton continued to gaze upon the youthful disclaimer of mundane joys. Presently he rallied, trying to look cheerful.

"Then my darling will not be fashion's queen!"

Playfully, yet with a touching earnestness that sought to reassure him, she shook her head.

"Never! she will be a May-queen, Stratford; no queen of pageants, but 'queen of the May,' and you shall crown her."

How radiant was the smile that thanked her; how fondly, how foolishly her lover believed her

CHAPTER IX.

A plain blunt show of briefly spoken seeming,
To hide her bloodless heart's soul-harden'd scheming.

BYRON.

YES; it was a fatal error on the part of the Earl of Castleton, that introduction of his orphan

ward to Lady Graham. It was the consignment of the dove to the talons of the vulture—but he had not only never divined her ladyship's *secret*, but believed her the rigid moralist it was her policy to appear. "There is," says the author of the "*Disowned*," "in some natures so great a hoard of generosity, that it often dulls their acuteness."

It is certain that the lady's craft promised in this instance to overmaster the subtle intellect of the great statesman.

As we have said, her ladyship had long regarded the Earl of Castleton with feelings differing widely from those popularly assigned, Lord knows why, to the Roman matron; but let us do her justice, her virtue was no mere assumption—no woman less laid herself out for general admiration; it was in Lord Castleton's eyes, and his alone, that she aspired to shine; in *his* heart alone that she coveted to reign. To all the world beside she was cold; Iceland's snows not colder. She was yet in her first year of widowhood, and whatever her inclinations might prompt, self-interest suggested the impolicy of appearing to follow his lordship abroad. It was the sternness or delicacy of *his* sentiments, rather than her own, that she was interested in consulting. But, lately, rumours had reached her that well-nigh startled decorum from her

throne ; strong in self-esteem however, stronger still in her iron nature, she resolved to await a seasonable opportunity for the furtherance of her schemes. Alas ! that opportunity was too soon thrown into her hands by Lord Castleton himself.

On the grandioso scale her ladyship was a beauty, and young still—oh, the significance of that little monosyllable “*still!*”—but when her daughter, now a tall girl of fourteen, was not by her mother's side, and it was but seldom she was to be seen in such loving contact, you would scarcely have given her thirty summers ; she was more than accomplished, she was highly-gifted, —what is called clever, oh *very* clever ! with gentle birth and breeding to boot.

“Wherein then,” she asked, “lay the incongruity, where the insurmountable obstacle to a union with Lord Castleton ?” Her fortune, it is true, was contemptible enough, but he was possessed of almost fabulous wealth, and squandered it like a prince, or like a madman ; any way, whatever the extent of his folly or profusion, she judged his lordship accurately enough when she credited him with too noble a nature to be swayed in any relation of life by the considerations of wealth.

That her ladyship had rejoiced (such a measure being practicable) to have advanced the date

of her baptismal register by some half-dozen years is possible, but a glance at her mirror, reflecting a form of faultless proportions, while not a line or fading hue marred the polished surface of her queenly brow, reconciled her to herself, and scattered fears to the wind.

Her sentiments and demeanour were sedulously shaped to the model she believed to exist in the mind of his lordship, for how often had she heard him descant, severely too, upon the free and frivolous manners of the age. His fastidious delicacy in all that concerned the gentler sex taught her how to mould her every word and action to the tone and colouring most approved by that fastidious delicacy.

One thing, however, seemed to have escaped the astute perception of her ladyship, and that was the number of years that had elapsed since the then youthful Lord Stratford had been wont thus severely to descant on such themes. Most very young men theorize and idealize upon women. Stratford did the like, not seldom involving himself in a metaphysical labyrinth which half invalidated one side of his argument, while it left the other in a glorious state of obscurity.

Clear enough to the lady's fancy at that time, however, was the conviction that the young nobleman's ideal was only to be found in herself;

years had failed to weaken that impression, though hope fluttered but faintly in her breast, for Sir Archibald lingered on from year to year, and when the final mandate released her from a burthen she had but too impatiently supported, Lord Castleton, smarting under the infliction of heavy domestic sorrow, was a self-exiled wanderer over half Europe.

Thus, when many months after, floating rumours of his engagement to one of the gayest of Thalia's band ran the round of the gossips' circles, Lady Graham was the first to contradict them, partly because she discredited them, and partly because she desired that they should be discredited. But when the report was confirmed under his own hand and seal, there was nothing further to be said, her astonishment was only to be equalled by her indignation and the bitterness of her disappointment.

The activity of her ladyship's brain, however, soon sought out a panacea if not a remedy for the evil—it might be slow in its operations, but it should be sure—revenge was now added to the poignancy of grief and baffled hopes. And the remedy her ladyship proposed? Well, there could be but one—the dislodgment of the enemy. This was at least imperative if she herself aspired to the vacant throne.

A notable scheme, and bold withal; worthy
the astute policy of a Lady Graham.

* * * * *

And now Lord Castleton presented his future
bride to her ladyship;—earnestly, almost
solemnly commanding her to her protection:—
“*a mother's protection,*” he emphatically added.

“Oh, lame and impotent conclusion,” Lord
Castleton! if thereby you thought to strengthen
your cause, a worse argument could scarcely
have suggested itself. Yet any heart less indu-
rated than that of the “Graham,” had softened
under the wistful and appealing gaze of the
doubly orphaned girl—almost any mother would
have given a passing thought to her own child,
and so compassionated this. Well, no matter,
some hearts abjure all softening influences.

In the exquisite loveliness, the tender grace
of the betrothed of the Earl of Castleton, her
ladyship beheld the obstacle (the sole obstacle,
whispered self-esteem) to her possession of a
countess's coronet, and so thinking, so feeling,
hated with a most withering hate the uncon-
scious usurper of a title to which she arrogantly
and without a shadow of right aspired. But
all this malice and misapprehension was a sealed
book to Castleton and his ward. The lofty and
generous nature of the one, and the unquestion-
ing faith of the other, lifted them above the

faintest shade of suspicion ; indeed the warmest feelings of gratitude on the part of his lordship were called forth, for, subduing by the force of a resolute will all outward evidence of the hell that raged within, her ladyship pledged herself to the interests of his ward, and thus succeeded in the very onset in establishing over her too pliant disposition a sort of matronly sway which she well knew she would hereafter find it difficult to shake off.

The first blow aimed was one but too well calculated to endanger the moral safety of the young fiancée.

"On motives of delicacy," her ladyship urged the concealment of the solemn contract of marriage existing between her and Lord Castleton. "As a point of honour, of scrupulous honour, she would counsel the immediate suppression of this report."

Yes ; "motives of delicacy" were assigned for this step—for the suppression of an engagement ratified in the death-chamber. "In pity to the lady she would advise that the matter be kept quite quiet. If it did not operate prejudicially, it would to say the least be most embarrassing—in her first season too. How would she brook the whispered comments—the gape, the gaze—all the idle curiosity of a world to which she was so new ? A refined mind could

not but shrink from such publicity—naturally—oh, quite naturally! For they could go nowhere, whether in public or in private, without the buzz of this report tingling in their ears. Why it would bring the journals—those awful journals!—down about them; they would be sure to canvass the matter, insolently premising now this reason, now that, for this most *unaccountable* delay of their nuptials."

Here a sigh, not faintly echoed by his lordship, escaped the schemer. "Pamphlets would be written, sonnets dedicated to the bride-elect,—in short it would be hardly possible for so very young a lady—so singularly isolated too—to cope with it all on her first introduction to the world."

What exquisite balderdash! what bathos was this! yet it told upon the sensitive nature of the proud English noble, argued out as it was with such consummate skill, barbed by such subtle, such fiendish mendacity. Still, Lord Castleton was the last man who, having once adopted a proposition, was likely to abandon it at the dictum of another, while, such was his unconquerable aversion to dissimulation, no matter on what plea, that even with these plausible motives weighing against an open, unreserved announcement of their engagement, it seemed doubtful whether her ladyship's *dis-*

interested advice would receive much countenance ; but if her arguments, founded on peril to her own hopes if the rumour spread, only partially prevailed, they at least sufficed to create an uneasiness in Lord Castleton's mind, and to cast the first shadow over the open brow of the young fiancée.

Yes, it was a fatal mistake that voluntarily-sought intercourse with her ladyship. Gifted with so lofty an intellect, and not unfamiliar with the various phases of human character, it may seem strange that the Earl of Castleton should be in any way duped by this arch hypocrite. It furnished yet another proof to the many going before, that men of the most unsullied honour are ever the last to suspect treachery. It must also be borne in mind that his lordship entertained not the faintest idea of the widow's predilection in his own especial favour.

It was, in fact, the austerity of her ladyship's life that induced the conviction that she was of all women the best fitted for so delicate a task as that of ushering into the world a young and motherless girl. Another mistake ; the sternest disciplinarian is not always the safest guide to untamed youth. Better far as pilot the simple-witted recluse of Château la Garde, than the profound tactician of St. James's.

When did the dove escape unscathed from
the coil of the serpent ?

CHAPTER X.

The comet that wildly roves through the regions of space is an object of far more eager contemplation than those heavenly bodies which, tied in their spheres, never swerve from the fixed law of gravitation.

A MONTH has passed away—but one little month—since that Elysian moment when Lord Castleton folded to his bosom, in the person of his future bride, an expectant “May-queen.” All since then has been with her a sunshine holiday.

The London season is at its zenith, and at the zenith of delight is the blooming heiress. To her enraptured fancy the world is one vast paradise—the beings that throng this paradise only a little lower than the angels.

Admired, caressed, and courted—it may be envied—the beautiful fiancée reigns the undisputed sovereign of fashion. His May-queen is queen alone of the revels, and Castleton’s anxious heart is answered.

Balls, routs, and fêtes—fêtes, balls, and routs—make up her life’s round. “Sleep only ends the riot which waking still begins.”

And ye who would coldly sit in judgment on this inexperienced and—woe for her!—motherless girl, pause ere you pronounce your verdict. Bethink you of your own spring-tide, and forbear to judge poor human frailty by an inch rule of starched propriety. “Qui vit sans folie n'est pas si sage qu'il croit.”

What very young girl is proof against the first burst of universal homage and adulation her appearance in the world excites? New to all and everything around her, wonder no less than rapture holds the senses of the neophyte in thrall.

Ignorant of her own surpassing loveliness Florence de Malcé could not be, but she had never made gauge and measure of its power, and she is herself amazed at its deification. Yet was it less the beauty of the débutante than that nameless attraction of manner, the sweet humility that blent itself with even her sprightliest graces, which took captive all hearts *but one*—this, combined with birth and a rich inheritance, completed the prestige which, in spite of the unblushing falsehood of Lady Graham, still clung to her as the betrothed of one of the first noblemen in the kingdom.

Rich inheritance! Yes, the heiress of La Garde was credited with estates scattered over one half of Continental Europe, while, in reality,

her fortune, duly estimated, had in England been termed but a moderate one. Popular rumour however, for ever overleaping the truth, assigned her mines of gold, and the young spendthrift honestly thought, when she thought at all, that her resources must be inexhaustible. That she acted upon this presumption is certain —acted with so reckless a disregard of consequences, that had not her guardian met her engagements from his own private fortune, ruin must have stared her in the face before the close of her first season.

Ah ! why did no warning voice arrest her in her headlong career ? Policy, the most cruel, restrained Lady Graham ; idolatrous affection, and a princely prodigality of spirit, kept Lord Castleton silent.

Thus, on all hands tacitly encouraged, it had been next to a miracle if she had not swerved from the fixed line of gravitation.

Between the needy and the unprincipled, who alike preyed upon her bounty, she could scarcely be expected to discriminate, while to have turned from a tale of misery had to her been simply impossible, neither was such restraint requisite. With a liberal, and even profuse, outlay, surplus sufficient had still remained for most noble acts of beneficence, but that of the prodigal went ahead of the liberal, or

even the profuse ; it reached the utmost height of luxurious waste ; nor while, without a syllable of remonstrance, debts of magnitude were discharged, and drafts to any amount honoured, did it seem very probable that there would be a stop to it.

The appointed guardian of her conduct would affix no limit to her expenditure. *He* pry into her menus plaisirs ! *he* stoop to calculate the expenses of her privy purse ! restrain that bounteous and expansive nature ! Never ! least of all in deeds of mercy. And let it be remembered to her credit that it was in deeds of mercy the lady showed herself most rampant.

No, while his ward's visiting list exhibited no name on which a breath of suspicion had ever lighted, Lord Castleton was comparatively heedless what sums were squandered ; if her own fortune were inadequate to the demands, his own was not.

His solicitude extended to her associates alone ; while these bore the broad, bold stamp of integrity, no real danger, he confidently believed, awaited her ; and for this the decorous propriety of the Lady Graham offered an unanswerable guarantee.

Viewing her ladyship, indeed; well-nigh in the light of a parent to his ward, Lord Castleton, whose gratitude was boundless, had more than

once, in the overflowings of a nature essentially generous and confiding, almost at her very feet poured forth the ardour of his thanks, little dreaming that, in thus baring before her all the strength and tenderness of his worship of the loved one, he was heaping coals of fire on her head, deepening the hate Lady Graham bore her, and which, however artfully disguised, burnt only the more fiercely for that disguise ; but, wary and watchful, it formed no part of her scheme to startle his lordship as yet into expostulation with his ward. She had too accurately calculated the cost to herself—calculated that she should thereby but rivet his chains the tighter ; for at a word, a breath, from her guardian, implying a shadow of reproof, the tear would start to Florence's violet eye, and then his brow would relax, a whispered prayer for forgiveness would fall upon his ear, and, ere the murmur of that prayer had died away, she would be folded to his heart—dearer, perhaps, for the transient cloud.

Yes, accurately had her ladyship sounded the depths of these two natures—both so tender and loyal, both so open and trusting, and one so proud and sensitive.

Strange to say, it was out of Lord Castleton's chivalrous devotion to his ward, with such noble

trust confided to his honour, that she based her hopes of a final bouleversement.

Let his pride *in* her, his honour *through* her, suffer taint, and from out the very deep of that devotion would spring the resolve to divorce her from his arms, however a sense of duty might still preserve to her the vigilance of the guardian.

"Lord Castleton was the last man," she argued, "to forgive an indiscretion." True, he was; but that indiscretion must, indeed, be of a grave nature that had had power to alienate a love so faithful and so fervent, so forbearing withal, as his. It may be questioned whether that love did not even derive additional strength from all the anxiety it cost him. The very faults of his ward, together with her sweet dependence on him, and the difficulties by which she was encompassed, by deepening his solicitude, had naturally a tendency to such a result. The scapegrace child is ever the one that lies closest coiled around the folds of a mother's heart. Could her ladyship, in place of her present intimates, distinguished as they were for the noblest qualities, encompass the unfortunate girl with the dissipated and the mercenary, her own folly, she never doubted, would speedily consummate her ruin.

Could she but effect a separation between her

and her guardian, though but for a few months, the game were surely in her own hands. Unhappily, however, for the furtherance of these charitable designs, there did not appear to be any near prospect of his lordship's emigration to foreign parts.

And what, meanwhile, were the feelings of her ladyship's pre-doomed victim in relation to herself?

What was it in Lady Graham that, amidst all her well-simulated interest in her behalf, made Florence de Malcé, by nature so warm and trusting, shrink from her in the first hour of their meeting? Why did she shiver at the clasp of her hand, and the blood run chill through her bounding veins, as she encountered the gaze of those magnificent eyes? Was it a foreshadowing of future ill?

We have small faith in the doctrine of presentiments; none the less is it certain that the Lady Graham was the only being in the wide range of that young girl's affections whom she did not, and could not, take within that range.

Her very presence had a depressing influence; as her shadow darkened the room, the laughing light of the girl's eye was suddenly quenched, the blithe young voice was hushed, and a languor stole over the sweet face, as though touched by some newly-awakened sorrow. Almost might

she have exclaimed with Marguerite, as defining her sense of the presence of Mephistopheles—

“When he is near I have no power to pray.”

Ingenuous as a child, Florence had at once told her guardian of this strange impression, but he had been so evidently pained as well as amazed at her words, had so affectionately besought her to try to conquer this feeling, that she never again even alluded to the subject ; her nature seemed to recoil from the thought of inflicting a moment's pain on any one of God's creatures.

“As maid, wife, and widow,” Lord Castleton assured her, “the conduct of Lady Graham had been beyond praise. A certain cold dignity of manner he did not deny ; but, as friend and counsellor to one in her peculiar position, she was perfection's self.”

Much, very much, Lord Castleton could know of the inner life of her whom he thus extolled, whether as “maid, wife, or widow.” He had met her at a time of life when, sated with dissipation, he turned to drink at a purer fountain ; and this cold, imperious woman, with the reserve of a throned empress, impressed him with a certain reverence, from the force of contrast with the free and frivolous of her sex. He was scarcely sufficiently interested to borrow the dissecting

knife of the anatomist for her inner character, though the lady took notable measure of his, adapting every tone and sentiment to his tastes. Cold of heart she was—freezing cold ; but her love—her suddenly-conceived love—for *him* took the scorching heat of the volcano.

One morning, Florence and Madame St. Géran called upon Lady Graham. She was from home, but her return was momentarily expected, and they alighted. Standing in the embrasure of one of the drawing-room windows, but half concealed by the curtains, was a young girl—very young, if the extremely short dress might be taken as a criterion ; any way she could not have reached her fifteenth summer. As the visitors entered she turned and, as spell-bound, gazed upon Florence, who, with both hands held out, sprang forward to meet her.

“ You are, I am sure you are Miss Graham.”

“ Yes, I am Ellen ; and you Madlle. de Malcé.”

“ Yes—no ; I am Florence,” was the laughing rejoinder.

Ah ! Florence de Malcé did not recoil from the child as she had done from that child's mother !

“ And how did you guess who I was, Ellen ?”

“ By description.”

“ Ah then, perhaps you won't love me, for it must, if a true one, have told you what a sad, sad

thoughtless girl I am, and I so want you to love me, Ellen."

"Why, can any one help loving you?" was the naïve reply.

"And you will let me love you, too, dear, won't you?"

After looking into the beautiful face bending over her, the neglected child, for such she was, burst into tears. "You will be the first that has ever wanted to love me, then, since I lost poor papa."

Touched to the quick, Florence pressed her fondly to her bosom.

"Then, Ellen, from this hour we will be friends, dear, dear friends. But look at poor darling Mamma St. Géran, she is dying to kiss away your tears," and the tender-hearted old lady did kiss away her tears, and soothed her with fond foolish words.

"There, there, that will do; see now what a rival I have raised up, not a kiss will be left for me, Ellen." And as Florence raised her smiling eyes, she met the fixed gaze of a stranger.

"A thousand, thousand apologies, madam, for this intrusion; I entreat I may not disturb you, I will go this moment."

Apology did, indeed, seem called for. However the vox populi had pronounced Madlle. de Malcé the especial leader of ton, her heart was as

yet far too simple and natural a one for the confirmation of any such verdict in the home circle, and the deepest blushes dyed her cheek as she bent to the stranger's low salutation.

"It is only Cousin Arthur," said Ellen.

"But this young lady, Ellen—may I not know on whom I have so discourteously intruded?"

"It is my new friend, Arthur—my dear, dear friend"—the gentleman bowed, and smiled—"and this lady," glancing at Mdme. St. Géran, "is her guardian, one guardian at least, and Lord Castleton is the other, for she has lost her papa like me."

The sweet voice trembled, then suddenly ceased, leaving the gentleman pretty nearly as much in the dark as to the young lady's identity as before; but at this moment a thundering knock at the door startled the whole party, Ellen flew like a frightened fawn to Madlle. de Malcé's side.

"You won't say anything? you won't betray me, will you?"

"Betray you, dear one?"

"No; you won't tell mamma you have seen me, I mean;—Arthur won't, I know, he never gets me in disgrace."

But there was no time for further parley, her mother's well-known step was heard outside, and Ellen, followed by the pitying gaze of the so-

called fashionist, glided by a glass door into an adjoining room.

In spite of every effort at self-command, the well-trained features of her ladyship betrayed a shade of annoyance at this rencontre.

The ceremony of an introduction necessarily ensued.

"My nephew, Sir Arthur Graham—Madlle. de Malcé, Lord Castleton's ward."

Her ladyship's greeting to her visitors had been cold as Arctic snows, and after an interchange of a few brief sentences, Florence took leave, accompanied to the carriage by Sir Arthur, nephew and heir to the late baronet, Sir Archibald Graham.

With the last sound of the wheels, he returned to the drawing-room.

"It's gone, madam! Irretrievably gone."

"What is gone, Sir Arthur?"

"My heart. By all the potency of the love-god's shafts, she has it;—the fairest she these mortal orbs ere lighted on."

"Your heart does not seem to be all you have lost."

"Perhaps not, madam;—I would lose a world for one smile of those heavenly lips; if that be an evidence of loss of sense, your ladyship is welcome to your insinuation. And so that fine fellow, Castleton, who is startling the Senate

with more than the eloquence of a Chatham, is guardian to this Peri."

"Lord Castleton is guardian to Madlle. de Malcé."

"Exactly ;—but is there not a flying rumour that he is one day to be something more than her guardian ?"

"If there be so, pray contradict it, for it is only rumour."

"Deuced glad to hear it, my chance is thereby mended. It would be a sorry one, indeed, against Castleton ; I know but one man in all England his superior."

"And who may that emphatic 'one' be ?—yourself, Sir Arthur ?"

"Well, perhaps," he responded, returning the cold sarcasm of her glance with interest ; "I never thought of that, I meant Castleton's friend however, everybody's friend, Herbert Malgrove."

"The most meddling fool in Christendom," sneered the lady.

An indignant flash shot from the baronet's eye. Her ladyship had made a false move this time ; it was not her custom to overshoot her mark, but she hated Malgrove with so subtle, so deadly a hate, as to supersede, if that were possible, the animus she bore to the young fiancée herself, and for once, impulse had the mastery of art.

"If singularity of opinion be a merit," said Sir Arthur, "I may congratulate your ladyship; you are the only woman within the range of the British dominions that would venture on a breath against that man; why, even the Earl of Castleton, lofty as is the pedestal on which he stands, owes half his greatness to his example. My Lord Stratford was no saint in his minority any more than the rest of us poor miserable sinners. Oh, I could tell you of not a few of his escapades before he became the grave senator he now is. It is even doubtful whether he had ever taken his seat in the House, but for Malgrove; he said it himself openly at his club. By-the-way, he is expected in town, I heard him say."

"Who is expected in town, Sir Arthur?"

"The most meddling fool in Christendom, madam."

This time, her ladyship's reticence did not desert her, and her jewelled hand concealed the withering glance her eye shot forth on receiving this information.

"The young lady will be at the opera, I suppose."

"What young lady will be at the opera, Sir Arthur? You may be a Sphinx, but I am no Oedipus to unravel the meaning of your enigmas."

"Cupid defend me! there is, henceforth, but one 'fair she' in creation for me; will your lady-

ship condescend to enlighten my darkness on this head, or will you not?"

"When your discourse once more gravitates towards common sense, I will endeavour to do so."

"Ah, your ladyship asks for the rarest of all commodities, one with which I am only familiar by name. I would simply inquire whether your ladyship will be at the opera to-night?"

"You know my means, Sir Arthur, and therefore know that I have no box at the opera."

"True; but this houri has, and your ladyship is often her escort to public places, I believe?"

"I have that honour."

"Yes; I never envied your ladyship till now. And will you vouchsafe a modicum of encouragement to a poor devil ten thousand fathoms deep in love, and suffer him to pay his respects to you to-night? Grisi's 'Norma' is perfection, and you will hardly be absent."

A scarcely perceptible inclination of the head was the only response, and with a careless, almost flippant "By-bye," the baronet left her ladyship to her meditations, and of a sufficiently perplexing nature she possibly found them, for this threatened visit of Malgrove boded ill for the furtherance of her schemes.

Sir Arthur Graham was a fine, high-spirited fellow, emphatically a gentleman, but he entertained a very hard judgment of the relict of his late uncle, to whose title and estates he had succeeded in default of direct male issue. He had known her for a cold and indifferent wife to the worthiest of husbands, and as an imperious and unfeeling mother to the most submissive of daughters, and, indirectly perhaps, resented this heartless conduct by a hard, sarcastic, and even frivolous demeanour, which galled the haughty woman to the quick.

Her ladyship had hoped to hold the baronet in leading-strings, for as the representative of the house of Graham he had been no ineligible match for her almost portionless daughter some years hence ; but leading-strings from youth upwards the gay young baronet had especially eschewed ; furthermore, he preferred to negotiate matters for himself in the mart matrimonial.

Hitherto he had kept tolerably free of Dan Cupid's entanglements, but this memorable morning he fell flat before the captivations of the heiress ; thus the manœuvrer saw before her the too probable frustration of a second pet project through the detested De Malcé.

CHAPTER XI.

It means mischief.—HAMLET.

IT was a reception at Ellerslie House, the residence of the Countess Ellerslie, one of the choice spirits of the age, which she had for more than three-quarters of a century lived to adorn.

Her ladyship was well known to the Earl of Castleton, Madlle. de Malcé was in consequence not alone an invited guest, but a most affectionately welcomed one. There, too, was Lady Constance Greville. She and Florence had met in the privacy of home ; met and loved each other as immediately as they met. There is a kind of freemasonry between young and tender hearts ; each intuitively feels the truth and goodness of the other. They did not become great intimates, many obstacles opposed themselves to their desires, but their friendship was not thereby impaired.

To-night both moved in the same orbit, and how beautiful were both, yet how different in their beauty ; how powerful the contrast between the large dark orient eyes of Constance, and the violet ones of Florence, with their veiled lids of most transparent hue ; the tresses black as night of the one, braided over a high and fault-

less brow, and the wealth of burnished gold that clustered round the blue-veined temples of the other ; the beautiful but bloodless cheek of Constance, the blushing and dimpled one of the younger girl ; the calm, almost holy expression of the one, the radiant, dancing joy brimming over in the other, making glad the hearts of all who beheld her ; then the regality of the Lady Constance's stately form, the nymph-like grace of that of Florence.

Nor less remarkable was the contrast in their dispositions ; the one so reflective—gravely reflective ; the other, without a single thought of what to-morrow's dawn might usher in.

Life with the Lady of Beechgrove had passed in one unruffled calm ; with Florence it had been agitated by a thousand conflicting anxieties.

Blessed with the love of the first, you had launched your barque on a summer lake, a cloudless sky ever above you ; with the last, that barque had been unceasingly tossed upon the wild waves of doubt and uncertainty ; shipwrecked, perchance, at last.

“ Why, Poynings, is it really you ? ” said handsome Claude Hamilton to a tall, saturnine, but distinguished-looking man who had just shaken hands with Castleton ; “ what miracle of miracles wafts your statesmanship to any temple of pleasure ? ”

"No miracle, I ween; nor even that which all of you run mad after, novelty—'tis but the old, old lure—woman-worship."

The young man seemed eminently to enjoy the joke of the stoic's enthralment, for he had never been seen with a woman in his life, and was known to hold the sex at a discount.

"And your divinity?" said Hamilton.

"Our venerable hostess the Lady Ellerslie."

Now there was so much matronly dignity with so much graciousness about this lady, that the cynic's reply was scarcely a satire.

"I am still in the dark, Poynings."

"So am I as yet; I came here to be enlightened so soon as fitting opportunity shall lend me her ladyship's ear. But first tell me who is yonder goddess over whom the most noble the Earl of Castleton hovers like a guardian angel?"

"Well, he *is* her guardian—literally her guardian—angel, if you will."

"But who *is* this divinity? Emphatically one, by Jove!"

"If you were not such an incorrigible red-tapist, Poynings, so everlastinglly absorbed by your musty parchments, you would not need to ask. She is the star of the season. Beautiful as the Venus of Praxiteles, and innocent as beautiful."

"*Sancta simplicitas!*" returned the statesman, with a curl of the lip; "a zoned Psyche. But I beg pardon, I believe you were comparing her innocence to the Paphian queen's. My question, however, is not *what* is she, but *who* is she? A less disinterested fellow would have asked *what has she?* I but inquire who claims to be her sire?"

"She is the daughter of the late Count de Malcé."

"De Malcé! Phœbus Apollo! A foreign adventuress after all!"

Hamilton's cheek rivalled the scarlet geranium in the button-hole of his snow-white vest.

"Poynings, this lady is the orphan heiress of the late Count de Malcé, one of the first gentlemen of France."

"With all my heart; and the brightest star in the fashionable hemisphere, say you?"

"Your eye might have spared you that question, Master Poynings."

"A shooting star, Hamilton, n'est ce pas?"

"Yes; so beware of her love-shafts. For myself, I dare not venture within bow-shot of them. If you would escape with unsinged wings, best steer clear of her orbit."

The philosopher shook his head with ludicrous sententiousness. "'Throw physic to the dogs; I'll none of it.' Why, man, dost think I have

lived through three decimals to be now transformed into a Cymon by an Iphigenia of the nineteenth century? No, the mistress I woo is of another coinage."

"Many men, many moods," said Sir Arthur Graham, advancing, and holding out every finger of his hand in the good old English fashion, first to one gentleman, then to the other. "The fair earldom of Castleton is in sore peril, I fancy; its haughty lord who lowers his crest to none, bends it reverentially enough to yonder 'fair one with the golden locks,' methinks."

"Haughty lord!" echoed Poynings. "Do you speak of Stratford Castleton?"

"Of Stratford Castleton. Why, has he not haughtiness to suffice for a score of earls?—he is a fine, high-hearted fellow, I don't deny, but if he has not inordinate pride the world foully wrongs him."

"And when did the world ever do aught else with any mortal man that was good for anything? If exalted loyalty and stainless truth, if scorn of all things mean and little constitute pride, the Earl of Castleton may lay claim to the title of a proud man," said Poynings, with generous warmth.

"And I would scarcely care to see a man humble if that were pride," said Hamilton.

"De tout mon cœur," responded the baronet,

"you cannot honour Lord Castleton more than I do, or *did* ; just now I am as savage as Vesuvius in a convulsion-fit. Look at him, with that all-conquering air of his ; don't tell me—Apollo was a satyr to him, and the worst of it is, that exquisite creature looks as if she seconded my opinion."

"Why you are never caught too, Graham?" said the statesman.

"Yes, but I am though—regularly strung up. Lost my heart, my wits, and my purse in one and the same hour ; the last was a sequence to the first, if my wits had been in, my purse had never been drawn out ; at any rate, the rascal who stole it had scarcely escaped with whole bones."

"But is it true that Castleton's friend wears her colours too—this lady's, I mean?—I hope not, he were a yet more dangerous rival. I confess I prefer Pylades to Orestes."

"If you mean Herbert Malgrove," said Hamilton, "his lordship would never forgive you if you did not. Why, you have named the first man of the day, unless, indeed, Castleton may go yard-arm and yard-arm with him."

"Yes, he's a right noble fellow is Herbert Malgrove," said Poynings.

"That is he," returned Sir Arthur, "he has but to open his lips to send every one else into the shade."

"Then you won't blow out his brains if he bear off your Helen?"

"No, he will leave that murderous work to Orestes, in the event of such a catastrophe," said Hamilton; "but then you see Castleton would never raise his hand against Malgrove."

The baronet smiled, but was evidently ill at ease. "Qui sait? love against friendship through the world."

"They must enact Marmontel's drama of 'The Test of Friendship,'" said Poynings.

"No," returned Hamilton, "in such a case the houri would lose both her knights, for the one would resign, and the other as certainly refuse to accept her."

"Then the world would get back two sensible fellows in lieu of one blockhead," said Poynings, "and the Circe be left to spread her nets for the capture of others—the blocks I mean—the world is full to repletion of them."

"Or perhaps break her own heart," said good-natured Claude Hamilton.

"What age are you, Hamilton, that you can talk such ineffable nonsense?—in these prosaic days too! Broken hearts, like cracked china, are easily mended—like ghosts and sea-serpents they are oftener talked of than seen;" and nodding to the two friends, the diplomat crossed over to his hostess, intent on feeling her pulse.

in relation to some official business in which her influence was of moment.

With all his gay attempts to treat the matter lightly, Sir Arthur Graham was certainly knee-deep, as he expressed it, in the love-god's toils, and he presently joined the circle of which Lord Castleton's ward, as she was frequently designated, and Lady Constance formed the centre.

Hamilton was left alone in the crowd. "It's all of no use ; who ever heard of a falcon bringing down a bird of Paradise ?" he soliloquized. "Why, like the moth, do I hover round the flame that consumes me ? If the rest fall back, Castleton will win her—has won her some say, and he deserves her too—yes, he does. Well, I'll go home ; it's hard to see her smile on all but me ; ah ! she is looking up at him now—the radiant creature ! And he !—oh, he cannot but adore her ! I think I'll sit here and watch her, it's so dismal dark where she is not ; perhaps, after all she may pass this way, and I may get one smile to cheer me, or to madden me, I scarce know which ;" and so Claude Hamilton, the handsome life-guardsman, a younger brother, with a younger brother's slender patrimony, flung himself on a settee to bask in the sunshine of that fair presence it had been so much wiser to shun. Put Cupid in one scale and reason in the

other, and reason will kick the beam in a brace of seconds.

He had not, however, been very long lost in his dangerous employ when a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and, looking up, he again saw Poynings.

“Hamilton, who is that woman gazing upon your Psyche, and on Castleton too, for they are in suspiciously close proximity—she with the snake-like eyes ?—there—see, she holds a fan before them now, to hide their diabolical expression perhaps—but no, all is changed, and the face of the marble Memnon is not more impassible. No matter, non dormit Judas.”

“Why, that’s Lady Graham. Diabolical ! she is accounted beautiful.”

“So was the Medusa, yet none the less terrible in her beauty. By all the spirits of Pandemonium, but she resembles the famous head at Cologne.

“‘Of fiend and goddess she partakes
And looks at once both love and murder.’

So can I fancy might Lucifer have gazed upon the Eden of our first parents. I would wager a cool thousand she is plotting the overthrow of their paradise ;” and Poynings moved on, or off ; political expediency had brought him on the stage, and his mission accomplished, he had no inclination to stay and play the reveller.

"Not going so soon, Poynings!" cried the dashing Colonel Hartley, confronting him as he was threading his way through a crowd of fashionables; "I have only just entered the hall of enchantment."

"Then you are a more sensible fellow than I took you to be, for you can't possibly have many hours left for the wear and tear of your health —moral, mental, or physical."

"Well, I am not afraid of a moral asphyxia at Ellerslie House. But who are here to-night? Do enlighten me."

"Oh! a huge mass as you perceive—fools and wise men jumbled together—the first in a glorious majority, as a matter of course; they're sure to carry the day."

"Cynical as ever, Master Timon, but I'm not to be scared by your diatribes; I like the easy déshabillé of folly."

"Then you'll be at the acme of delight, for the goddess is in an undress to-night. There's Castleton, it is true, but even he forms no exception to my philippic; he is on the high road to preferment. Some special act of madness is about to be perpetrated, or I am as huge a dunce as the rest."

"What? wedlock? for that's your supreme culmination of human folly, I believe."

" Well, yes ; depend upon it he is on the point of crossing the Pons Asinorum."

" I shouldn't wonder ; the great orator is just the man to be befooled. Your grand genius, your man of granite, is always the most easily snared to his ruin ; your dunderhead is cautious, calculating. Pity ! pity ! he's such a fine chivalrous fellow, with such a large human soul too, in spite of a certain inflexibility of character of the old Roman mould."

" Oh ! he's none the worse for that, colonel, none the worse for that ; I remember to the full as much of the kindness and warmth of Castleton's nature as of its inflexibility. Between you and me, Hartley, I don't care a rap for the ancients. Marcus Brutus and his illustrious ancestor—save the mark !—I regard as out-and-out charlatans, as well as ruthless murderers. At Eton, Stratford (he was Lord Stratford then) went by the name of the 'boy-champion.'

" Oh ! he's the prince of good fellows, I know, but who is the Armida that is laying siege to the heart of the ex-champion of the Eton scamps ?"

" Why, see you not yonder bright-haired houri with the smiling eyes,—smiling lips ?—by Jove ! she's all smiles."

" I do,—I do ;—but Poynings, where is Castleton's folly if this be his Hebe ? It's the new

star, and she's angelic ! Why, man, you may read a sonnet to her beauty as you sip your morning chocolate ; the town is in a ferment about her. The men pronounce that smile of hers a panacea for every ill that flesh is heir to."

"A rival to Morrison's pills, eh, Hartley ? But what say the women on the subject ? Well, let your eye follow the direction of mine—yes, that's it,—note the devilry in yonder Juno's eye and you are answered."

Colonel Hartley did look in the right direction, for his gaze was in a moment rivetted on Lady Graham.

"I do note, and on whom that eye is fixed, but what is your inference ? Why should this Psyche be an object of hate to her ? for hate, envy, and malice are all unmistakably depicted there, or were a minute since."

"Only that the Psyche is in her way."

"Ah ! as how ?"

"Is she not young, and heavenly fair—inno-cent too, 'tis said ?"

"And said with truth—but your deduction ?"

"Dunce ! Can you not draw that ? The Juno is neither young nor fair—ah ! you are not of my opinion, tastes differ ; any way she is a widow, and the earldom of Castléton ;—oh ! you begin to have a glimmering—Bye-bye then ;—another such a night and I should be non est."

CHAPTER XII.

And she was come to love me when
None lived to love me so again.

PRISONER OF CHILLON.

SOME time elapsed before Lady Graham could be brought to yield to Florence's petition to suffer her daughter to pay her even an occasional visit. "She was," she said, "such a mere child; anything out of the routine of school discipline was so utterly subversive of order. Ellen was not bright even for her age, the school-room was really the only place for her for years to come."

Much did our soft-hearted Florence marvel at all this, as totally at variance with her own notions of a mother's fond affection. It never occurred to her simple wit that Lady Graham, herself a widow, and an acknowledged beauty, cared not to raise certain questions by the introduction of a fairer aspirant to notice in the person of a tall young lady, least of all could she surmise that her ladyship's main reluctance to allow of her daughter's visit to her, lay in her dread of her falling in with Lord Castleton, and so dispelling the illusion of her own youth in his eyes.

With her usual clear-headed calculation, how-

ever, her ladyship contrived that Ellen's calls (since, to avoid particularity, paid they must be) should be at a time when it was pretty certain that the great statesman's official engagements would confine him strictly within his own doors ; while, to incur as little risk as possible, permission was granted to Madlle. de Malcé to meet her daughter in the square, near to Brook Street, and these appointments came to be the delight, the sole delight of Ellen's solitary life; her "sunshine holidays," she called them—and Florence the hitherto neglected girl learned to love with an idolatry proportioned to the void in her own heart, a heart yearning for that sympathy which she had so entirely lost with her father's life, for she had never known a mother's tenderness. The exaction of perfect obedience was all Lady Graham had ever aimed at from her child, to yield that obedience that child's chief care, or if in days long past and gone, in a breast so soft and warm, other feelings claimed their indefeasible right of recognition, the freezing tone and haughty glance that checked their display taught her at last that hardest of lessons, to bury them down deep within the innermost recesses of her young and slighted heart.

Can it then be matter of surprise that on this fatherless and worse than motherless child the presence of the radiant Florence acted as a

species of enchantment ? At once it roused her out of the murky atmosphere that had made her world a dungeon, and brought her into light and life and gladness. It might be likened to the effect of a transformation scene to one who had never seen a pantomime.

Ellen called Florence her sunbeam, and so she was a sunbeam, for her tenderness, her mirth, her careless grace shed light on all within the radius of her influence.

At first Ellen was lost in wonder at the affection lavished upon her, for in common with all neglected children she was very shy—then she was charmed—finally subdued, subdued to deepest gratitude and love.

Very fain would Florence have had her spend whole days and weeks with her, but the bare mention of such a thing half scared away the poor child's senses.

"Oh no ! please no ! I might meet Lord Castleton, and then I should be forbidden to go to you at all."

Madlle. de Malcé looked her amazement at this speech.

"Forbidden to come here if you met Lord Castleton ? that is just what I wish you to do. Why, Ellen, darling, you would love Lord Castleton dearly, and he,—he would so love you, too."

Shyly, yet a little archly, Ellen looked up.

"Then I had better stay away, Florence, dear ; but," and she looked cautiously round as if in dread of being overheard, "mamma would never forgive me if I were to let Lord Castleton see me."

"But why, Ellen, why ? what can my darling —yes, Ellen, I may call him so to you, only to you ;—what can he have done to offend Lady Graham ?"

"Oh nothing, dear, it is nothing of that sort."

"Then what is it, you little Sphinx ?"

"Well, I don't know ; but I think it must be because I am so dull and stupid ; as mamma says, I am so awkward and ungainly, and being her own child, you see, and she so beautiful herself, it must be mortifying."

Tears filled the eyes of the so-called queen of fashion. "And she could tell her this ! her mother !" and again that shuddering recoil of Lady Graham crept through the frame of Castleton's betrothed.

Presently she rallied. "Ellen, darling, this is all a great, very great mistake ; do you know that if you,—but you won't be hurt, dear ; but if you dressed differently, wore your frocks longer, you would be graceful as you are pretty."

"Ah yes, these horrid short frocks ; do you

know, Flory, the boys in the streets quite stare at me ; but I know I am dreadfully awkward, only you are so kind and loving you won't wound me by saying so. But I am afraid I must say good-bye, for it is raining, and mamma is always uneasy if I am caught in the wet."

Florence smiled, and wondered whether tenderness for her daughter or her daughter's attire bred the lady's apprehensions.

Shabbier habiliments had surely never before disguised the form of a young lady of condition; a soubrette would have spurned them.

"Don't go, Ellen, this little shower is only the baptism of the flowers ; see, the sun is peeping from behind that crystal cloud." They were in the garden of the square.

"I am afraid I must ; ah yes! here is made-moiselle to fetch me. God bless you, dear, darling Flory !" and casting many a longing, lingering look behind, Ellen Graham returned to her cheerless home.

CHAPTER XIII.

Whether the fair one sinner it or saint it,
If folly grow romantic I must paint it.

POPE.

To the recent arrival in town of Lady Constance was soon added that of Emily Malgrove, and so for a while the reign of “the Graham” was virtually suspended, and at the choice of her ladyship; for she cared not to come into collision with two women so straightforward and honest of purpose, withal loyal unto death to Lord Castleton.

Little dreamed that wily lady that Emily Malgrove had returned from the coast at the instance of Herbert, that she might not alone keep vigilant ward over the débutante, but over her ladyship as well, of the tenderness of whose sentiments towards her he was something dubious.

And truly Herbert's half-fledged fears might quite honestly have taken more solid root, for the Graham administration had already wrought abundance of evil. Mademoiselle de Malcé had, if not with the sanction of her ladyship, certainly without hindrance from her, plunged into a whirl of dissipation from which, for the present

season at least, it would be difficult to extricate her.

Of a verity some guardian genius was needed. The spoiled darling of her affianced husband, flattered and caressed by all beside, Florence was just a trifle wilful, certainly capricious ; so utterly thoughtless too, and so undoubting in her faith in all, that she regarded the players on the world's wide stage rather in the light of gods than mortals.

And there were times when even Castleton himself, though with a lover's doting sophistry he turned from the faintest perception of error in the loved one, could not blind himself to the consequences of a life of dissipation such as she now so hotly pursued. Alas ! in his eyes she was perfection's self ; she was his world, for, Malgrove excepted, what else remained to him ?

"Perfection's self!" yes, so he thought her, but it was the illusion, the enchantment, of a lover.

And all seducing, with its lights and its shadows, as was the character of Florence de Malcé, was it one most likely to ensure happiness or misery to its possessor ? A foreboding of the last had more than once clouded Castleton's soul, but when he looked upon that angel-face, beaming with the holy light of innocence and love—love for him—when he watched the

gay and graceful evolutions of her aërial form, and drank in the delicious melody of that sweet wild laugh, so full of the spirit's gladness, he could not, he would not, believe she was marked out for sorrow, far less for guilt.

There was one, however, as we have seen, who from his retired and distant home did apprehend danger if this career of folly were persisted in.

Lady Malgrove soon found herself wholly incompetent to stem the rapidly rising tide, and she wrote and told Herbert so, and that true friend joined Castleton in London with scarce an hour's delay.

Yes! the threatened blow descended, and the power of "the Graham" tottered to its base.

"The most meddling fool in Christendom" might have been seen in Park Lane at breakfast with him whom her ladyship confidently believed (if left unmolested by this priest) she should in course of time bring into her toils.

And how did this meddler do his spiriting? By harsh remonstrance with his friend on the vicious indulgence he was granting to his ward, or by expostulation with the culprit herself, on the worse than folly of which she was guilty, in thus plunging headlong into a career that must perforce end in ruin? Did he, assuming the right divine accorded only to the preacher,

solemnly adjure her once and for ever to abandon the haunts of pleasure, and in all the flush and furore of her first season, bury herself along with the birds of the air and the stately deer of the forests of Oatlands or La Garde ?

No, to neither of these sage counsels did Herbert seriously incline ; he was a disciple of that school whose Great Founder taught the wiser doctrine that seeks rather to allure men to the right, than to flagellate or shame them out of the wrong. The priest, like the layman, brave old Dryden, believed that

“The way to win the restive soul to God
Is to lay by the disciplining rod.”

And so he simply proposed, on the principle of counter-irritation, and as a preliminary step, the immediate purchase of a villa in some picturesque spot not too remote from the capital. The heiress had no country residence in England ; the one her guardian had talked of renting for her use was at too great a distance from town, from park, parade, and opera. Herbert's object was to give some new employ to her mind.

Castleton was enchanted. “Why had he never thought of this ? Poor darling ! she had been miserably neglected of late ; he had been so utterly absorbed by his parliamentary duties, they exacted every hour of his time. He ought

never to have accepted office, or if he had, he should at once have thrown up the guardianship of this poor child. He was sure he had proved himself totally unfit for so delicate a charge ; Malgrove must see that she had been cruelly deserted, literally turned adrift upon the waves, to sink or swim as chance might direct."

Malgrove did not see all this, but in his friend's present mood held it unwise to contradict him ; he merely inquired "if Lady Graham had not opposed herself to such an unceasing round of gaiety ?"

"Lady Graham—well, no doubt she was the very beau idéal of chaperones, a woman of such strict decorum, such ultra rigid principles—not a question but she had conscientiously performed her duty : besides, he could never have borne to clip the wings of his beautiful bird of paradise. If she had somewhat overshot the mark in her outlay, was it to be wondered at, new as she was to everything ? No, there was no one to blame but himself. Well, all would be altered now Emily was so much with her; and then this villa—such a happy thought ! such a master-stroke ! Fancy her being without one, it was monstrous ! Not an hour should be lost in its purchase."

"But I think, Stratford, I would not tell her just yet. Suppose you complete the purchase

first, it will be a business of at least some days. Perhaps if you give her such a long note of preparation the novelty of the idea will have worn off before she even sees her dove's nest."

"To be sure it will; my dear Herbert, how you think of everything."

"Ah! I wish I did; only it occurred to me that this new toy would, in its completion—furniture, decorations, &c.—give both occupation and amusement for several weeks, which may worthily take the place of all these balls, and routs, and races."

Castleton shook his head, and sighed wearily.

"Yes, indeed yes; there are too many by far, I own I have been astonished at the latitude Lady Graham has allowed her; I say Lady Graham, for our good Madame St. Géran is a cypher; but is it not surprising, Herbert, that my darling, who has hitherto lived a life of almost monastic seclusion, should, with such rapturous enthusiasm, throw herself into the very heart of these dissipations?"

"Ah! that's just it, Stratford—I fancy if your ward had been less a recluse she had never have drank so eagerly of the Circean cup. In the novelty lies the charm. But be of good cheer; soon, very soon will your dove, with weary wing, nestle in your bosom, heart-sick of her toilsome flight."

"God bless you, Herbert, for saying so! I have been, to own the truth, uneasy, and should have been yet more so, but that Lady Graham smiles at my anxiety."

"*Indeed!* well, we'll see to this matter at once."

And the villa was purchased—but how many mornings were consumed before this consummation was effected—and even then how much was to be done, how much undone; for what temple reared by mortal hands could be worthy the priestess it was to enshrine?

They had made choice of a villa on the banks of the Thames, midway between Richmond and Twickenham, and nowhere is our noble river more picturesque in its windings than near these favoured spots.

And now, architects, artists, and landscape gardeners were sent down, and artisans by the score set to work. Expedition was urged;—at any cost. Oh! magic words! "At any cost!" your true lever, your only "open sesame," is gold, emphatically a wand of enchantment. Old lamps, invisible rings, and wishing-caps have a deservedly high repute in fairy-land, but *out of* it, the sole talisman wherewith to satisfy the audacious demands of bricklayers, stone-masons, paper-stainers, &c., is the current coin of the realm. Nevertheless that Twickenham villa,

with its groves and conservatories, its fountains and water-nymphs, its gay parterres and its secluded nooks, overshadowed by the waving branches of the weeping ash and the graceful willow, did look as if fairy hands had spirited them into more than earthly loveliness.

"It must, oh, Herbert! it must be the work of a magician," was the delighted expression of the delighted girl, as with eyes swimming in glad happiness she literally rained down smiles and blushes now on Stratford, now on Herbert, when she first beheld it.

"It is the work of a magician, sweet Florence,—of your guardian-sylph," whispered he, "and sometimes when weary with midnight revels you will reward him by coming hither for a little quiet—will you not?"

"Sometimes! oh, Herbert, I will live here for ever and ever! I can never, *never* tire of it!"

Again the dancing light of her eye was dimmed by grateful tears as she turned them on her "guardian-sylph." In another minute both were lost amidst the embowering foliage of the gardens.

"'Live here for ever and ever!' so thinks she now," sighed Herbert, "yet the first drawing-room ball will lure her from its sylvan glades. Emily, is there no saving the young prodigal?

for from my inmost heart I believe she is worth saving."

The lady addressed smiled, even as she echoed her companion's sigh.

"So far good, your bait to catch the flying-fish has taken you see—she is in ecstasies with this lovely retreat, so admirable a foil to the flaunting town. For the present the toils are loosened."

"But not broken, you would say?"

Again an eloquent but ominous shake of the lady's head.

"Herbert! the winds are less inconstant than are her many changing moods. Who that beheld her as we did a few weeks since in the seclusion of Oatlands, could have dreamed she had taken such deep delight in what is termed pleasure? Would that we were once more there, if only for her sake; in this glittering hollow town there is everything to feed her passion for novelty and luxury. How is it Lady Graham, so rigid, it is said, in her notions, has sanctioned such dissipation? Again, how is it that your friend fails to realize the extent of danger to which this young and untried girl is exposed, standing thus alone, with a world at her feet. Oh, Herbert! why does Lord Castleton delay giving to her a husband's right of protection?"

"Emily, he dare not! Even I, with eyes wide

open to her danger, dare not urge him. Listen; —a father's dying injunction forbids it. The count's feeling appears to have been so strong upon this point. The delicate health, and subsequent loss of an idolized wife, he distinctly traces to her early marriage, hence his apprehension lest his child should run a similar risk. No, I think, I fear, from the distress it has occasioned my poor Stratford, that the appeal to him on this head must have been urged with a solemnity that leaves him without an alternative but submission. Ah! no, Emmy, that he yearns to call her by the sacred name of wife, yearns with a torturing solicitude that harrows up my very soul to witness, is beyond a doubt. If we can but keep our newly-fledged bird out of mischief, all may go well."

"Ah, Herbert, *if!* Why, her boundless wealth alone would suffice to plunge her into the wildest extravagances."

"Emily, you err in this; Mdlle. de Malcé's wealth is not boundless, as you seem to imagine. Beyond the rent-roll of La Garde, her matrimonial estate, by no means a large though an unencumbered one, she has comparatively nothing."

"Then, Herbert, she is ruined! But you must be mistaken. It cannot be but there are other sources from which she derives the vast

sums squandered away on idle pleasures. Why, she has lavished a fortune in presents alone to her soi-dite friends, while her charity extends to all—to all. With such reckless prodigality, indeed, does she scatter gold, that you might believe, literally, that she had unlimited credit on all the gold mines in the known world. And yet, so strange ! she has never overdrawn. I asked her one morning, on seeing a huge pile of bills, paid and unpaid (she had not an idea which), thrust pêle mêle into an escritoire, if she were not in dread of overdrawing at her bankers'. Would you believe it, Herbert—she did not know what I meant. On my explaining—yes, you smile to see what a shrewd financier I have become—I, who never had a guinea to spare in my life, and should not now have one at all but for you, dear, noble Herbert," and the lady raised her lips to his, to be kissed with as tender a simplicity as would her child have done.

"And when you did explain, dearest ?"

"Why, she only laughed a merry laugh—said 'she supposed the fairies with Queen Mab at their head, besieged the bank in the night with nuggets of gold, to be made payable to her order'—and then she wept, oh, so bitterly ! at the remembrance of her father, who had amassed these treasures for her. And in the evening that splendid portrait, the whole length of the

count, arrived from La Garde, which Lord Castleton had had copied for her, and that night she stayed at home, though it was a birth-night ball, and for the next two days was denied to all but her guardian."

Joy lit up the fine features of Herbert. "Fear not, Emmy; with such a heart she cannot go far astray."

"Ah, Herbert! I have spoken of her faults, but I could never, never do justice to half her gentle virtues, so feminine, so endearing. The tenderness of her heart, the softness of her disposition, its sweet humility; so prompt to atone for word or glance that her delicacy construes into offence, so eager to forgive slight or wrong in others, so incapable indeed of believing it, for her trust in human goodness is boundless. Herbert! she is so perfect, yet so imperfect."

"Emmy, I could feel it in my heart to play the baby, and shed tears of joy, to hear all this. Yes, it is in the sweetness of her disposition, and the unsullied purity of a heart so warm and trusting, that I base my hopes of her coming out at last, unscathed, from this fiery furnace. Still I am not blind to the peril of her present position. It will not do to leave her wholly unbridled, though the rein be left somewhat loose. Serious opposition might defeat the very object we have in view. I trust so much to your gentle

womanly influence, my Emily ; meanwhile, I will rouse Stratford to the worse than folly of allowing unlimited credit at her bankers' ; but alas ! he is himself so splendid in his tastes, of so princely a generosity, that he will be less alive than almost any other man in existence to the danger of countenancing so prodigal an expenditure, but rouse him I will. Meanwhile, this retirement cuts her off from the world."

The pair now appeared in sight, both looking so radiantly happy, so blest in each other !

Malgrove's heart beat high with hope.

"Emily, we will not disturb their paradise to-day. Oh ! she will never wander far out of the track of womanly goodness ; there is a holy light shining out of those sweet eyes that reassures me."

The lady pressed his hand in token of her sympathy with this bright prediction.

Alas, for its fulfilment !

In the might of her young loveliness, smiling and joyous, the May-queen advanced.

"Oh, Herbert ! Is it not a fairy paradise ? The very dearest spot in all the earth for fêtes and balls, and masques and pageants. Only fancy, Emmy, a fête champêtre, in this 'our forest of Ardennes' ; will you be Rosalind or Celia ? Then a costume ball like Watteau's lovely pictures ; can anything be half so enchant-

ing ? And a yacht, I am to have a yacht and a fairy skiff, then, for water parties, and gypsy encampments, and—and—oh, it will be too, too delightful !”

And she clapped her tiny white hands in all the rapture of anticipated bliss.

And he !—that man of iron rule, of mighty intellect! the thunder of whose eloquence nightly, shook the Senate-house—Cupid defend us !—he stood there weak as a girl ;—weaker, for the girl was conqueror.

Yes ; as she thus, with careless unconscious grace, developed her future plans, the Right Honourable the Earl of Castleton, avoiding the direction of Malgrove’s eyes, jerked down a branch from the overhanging trees, and began switching his boots with all the elaborate solicitude of the most dainty coxcomb ; nor can it be denied that the projector of this notable scheme for the prodigal’s reform, the Rev. Herbert Malgrove himself, looked just a trifle crestfallen. Of a verity his bait had taken,—taken with a vengeance, only it was in the inverse ratio, since it was likely to prove but the substratum for another bait to entice a fresh recruit of revellers.

Yes, this charming sylvan retreat, this dove’s nest, designed to win Thalia from the haunts of dissipation, was forthwith to be transformed into another hall of Comus, wherein to enact fresh

fooleries : and he who laid the train of gunpowder was in due course to be invited to share in his own saturnalia, to witness, in short, the discharge of his own artillery.

The reverend gentleman exchanged a hurried glance with the senator. Clearly both were outwitted.

All know the fable of the division of the oyster by the lawyer. Now, that dazzling Peri who stood there, bore, indeed, no very striking resemblance to the sleek attorney gobbling up the fat oyster, but the two gentlemen, one on either side of her, meditating the downfall of their very clever scheme, were not altogether unmeet representatives of the baffled disputants who were left, each with an empty shell.

In modern phraseology, both were “ sold.”

CHAPTER XIV.

And the wreck'd heart lies cold.

BYRON.

SPRING had waned into summer, nay, the summer campaign was at its last gasp. The signal-gun—the breaking up of the House—was alone wanting to demolish it entirely, when renewed life was breathed into its decaying vitals by the

announcement of a series of entertainments to be given at the Twickenham Villa by its fair young châtelaine.

Cards of invitation were issued for fêtes of every description for a month to come.

Yes, the modest retreat of Herbert's choice was transformed into a hall of dazzling splendour.

Marquees, decorated with floating banners of gold and azure, invited the weary to repose, cooling fountains refreshed both sight and sense. In the evening, myriads of lights gleamed like fire-flies from the over-arching boughs of the trees, while music from invisible choristers filled the air with delicious sounds, and delicate perfumes scented the already fragrant air. All that could charm the senses, all that could delight the imagination, all that could gladden the spirit, was realized in this bower of bliss.

And Lord Castleton ! With what feelings did he contemplate this huge amount of folly ?

After passing through all the gradations of the most anxious solicitude, however, matters came to a precipitate, but decisive halt.

An accident occurred, which stayed the thoughtless girl in her headlong career, when nothing else, perhaps, had had the power to do it. This was the sudden summons of her guardian to Oatlands, whither Malgrove's engage-

ments had called him a fortnight previously ; a summons to the bed-side of his beloved friend.

Returning late at night from a visit to a dying friend (for they were all, from the poorest labourer of the glebe to the wealthiest landed proprietor, friends), he had been thrown from his horse and his arm broken, and though not otherwise seriously injured, was so much shaken that fever set in, and confinement to his room became an imperious necessity.

Wild with grief, and it might be in a measure disenchanted, for the cup of pleasure only sparkles at the brim, Florence clung to Lady Malgrove with prayers to be allowed to share her vigil by Herbert's sick-bed.

Little rhetoric was needed to bend Emily to her desires—too glad was she to bear her from the festivities about to be inaugurated at the so-called rural retreat. And so the heart of Castleton was at rest on his ward's account, for she was once again safe in the seclusion of old Oatlands.

And now it was, in the calm of this seclusion, that the secret grief that had so long preyed upon the invalid betrayed itself to the anxious eye of friendship. With greater leisure for observation, it soon became apparent that a change, apart from the decadence of bodily strength, was creeping over him ; that he was, in short, strug-

gling manfully, however ineffectually, against a depression of spirit, a weariness of life, the cause of which Castleton could in nowise conjecture, but which alarmed him the more from its being so entirely new a feature of Herbert's brave and earnest nature.

Ah, my Lord Castleton ! little knew you how much that great heart had braved during your long sunshiny holiday of love in the South.

While Herbert lay in actual danger, consequent upon his accident, no day passed without a written line of inquiry from Constance, who still remained in town. A note of hers to Emily, congratulating her upon his amendment, lay before Herbert as Castleton sauntered, unobserved by him, into the library. More than ever struck by his friend's dejection, he suddenly paused, as a few indistinct words, expressive of despondency, met his ear.

"I fear, Herbert, you are hardly up to a drive this morning ?"

"Hardly, perhaps," and he sunk back in his chair with a weary sigh.

That sigh was echoed by his friend, with compound interest.

In a moment the generous fellow roused.

"My dear Stratford, I don't know what I am saying, certainly I can go ; why, to-morrow I

mean to give my arm its freedom," and he drew it from its sling. "See! it's all right."

Stratford looked both grave and sad.

"If the arm is all right, something else is all wrong. Oh! Herbert, you don't deceive me by this miserable attempt at disguise, my eyes have long been opened to your state."

Not the most timid girl throbbing beneath the first fond whisper of love could have betrayed more confusion than did Herbert at this blunt speech, but still anxious to spare his friend the pain which a revelation of the truth had cost him he turned inquiry away.

"He would not deny," he said, "that he was just a trifle down. He had felt, he ought to be ashamed to own it, with so many blessings, but he had felt a kind of weariness of life creeping over him of late."

Castleton humoured his evident desire to waive the subject, but more and more alarmed, a physician of eminence was summoned from town, and the result of this step was a stringent recommendation to him to abstain from his labours, mental and physical, for a full twelvemonth—to travel, in short, with no other end in view than the restoration of his health.

In vain Herbert remonstrated. Every obstacle was swept away before the indomitable will

swayed by the yet more indomitable affection of his lordship.

"Think, Herbert, how you have driven me up and down and round about the world like a tee-totum, for your own pleasure and my special edification all these years, and have I ever rebelled against my tyrant?"

Now this threatened banishment had not helped to cheer the invalid, and at this speech of his friend, so full of tender playfulness, he looked up with a sad earnestness in his glistening eyes—

"Indeed, dear Stratford, you have not; and I would not be churl enough to negative your petition now if anything short of disappointment were likely to result from this journey, but it will not, indeed it will not—I scarcely think I shall recover, Stratford."

Castleton started to his feet. "Herbert! What is it you tell me? Not recover! Good God, what is it you would hide from me?"

But Malgrove remained silent, though his emotion became every instant more marked.

At last, his lordship's hand was laid impressively on his shoulder. "Herbert! have I deserved this? By our boyhood's love—by the yet deeper feelings of our manhood, I do conjure you to confide in me, for that something moves your brave spirit I see beyond all doubt!"

"And yet, Stratford, that 'something' being remediless were perchance best left unspoken. I had not thought to pain you by mention of that which is 'past hope, past cure.'"

Stricken to the heart's core, Castleton nevertheless uttered no word.

"Nay then, you shall have it; and since nothing less will content you, I will go this journey—I shall at least have the prospect of your happiness to cheer me on my way."

"Herbert, you go not hence alone."

"Why, how mean you? This is folly, Stratford, worse than folly. Solitude has been too long familiar to me to daunt me now."

"And wherefore, Herbert? Why must you and solitude be so familiar? Is your resolve a wise one, think you—but I will not hold it a resolve. So formed to bless, and be blessed, it seems to me that you are inverting the evident designs of providence in leading a lonely life. And I had planned such happy days for us together here, in the retirement of dear old Oatlands."

And his lordship walked the room in strange disorder.

"I had pictured you blessed as myself with a fair young wife, to heighten your joys and soothe your sorrows; I had even"—and he attempted a smile—"I had even ventured to

select this fair being, Herbert, and, trust me, the choice had not discredited my taste."

With a foreboding that he was about to hear the one beloved name that made ever such sad, sweet music to his ear, Malgrove yet nerved his courage to ask—

"And the name of this fair being, Stratford?"

"Constance Greville, dear Herbert."

The hectic of a moment flushed the before pale cheek, and a sickly smile played round the mouth. A moment's pause in which the tenderness of the lover contended with the pride of the man, and Castleton was answered.

"Stratford, I did risk my adventurous bark in that uncertain sea. It was wrecked; you have my secret."

"How! rejected!" exclaimed Castleton, in confusion. "Malgrove, my friend, I dreamed not of this; forgive me; for worlds I would not have touched upon this subject."

"Nay, 'tis over; perhaps it is better as it is; life had else become too dear to me. God should have no half-worshippers, and an earthly idol had well-nigh dethroned His image in my breast. Wilfully, too, I inflicted pain upon her I loved; for long ere I poured out my soul's deep worship at her feet my heart foreboded its issue. The blow is heavy, but I bow before the 'Chastener.'"

Confounded and distressed at having struck

upon a chord that vibrated such dreadful discord, Castleton leaned his head upon his hand in embarrassed silence, till seeing his friend about to leave the room he stayed him.

"Forgive me, Herbert, if I probe a wound inflicted by a yet dearer hand ; but while I grant to Constance all that the most fastidious of our sex seek in woman, I would still ask, is there none other who, sensible of my friend's unequalled worth, might in time heal this wound ?"

"None, Stratford! none ! My heart is ashes. In one frail bark I perilled all my hopes : the bark went down ; I will put to sea in none other."

Castleton stood as one smitten to the dust at these words.

"Nay, Stratford, you would not have me fling a worthless offering at the shrine of womanly love and confidence ; for what have I left wherewith to requite a fond affection ? Constance has my heart—true, she has rejected it. Oh, so gently, Stratford ! Spare me the recollection of her tender regret ; if I loved before, I was half mad then. Well, well, the die is cast ! I have lost and cannot stake again."

And Malgrove left the library.

CHAPTER XV.

The idol of a thousand hearts that sighed in vain for one

* * * *

So young and so untender.

LEAR.

Not all the earnest supplications, backed though they were by the tears and prayers of his ward, could prevail with Herbert to suffer Castleton to accompany him abroad. Disinterested and generous to the last, he urged upon his friend the imperative necessity of remaining to keep watch over his charge, now about to return with her aged protectress to all the seductions of a gay capital, for the parsonage was to lose its gentle mistress, it being on all hands voted that if his lordship remained, Emily should accompany Herbert—indeed, she would not be denied, and Castleton was deaf to all remonstrances on this point.

“ I have reluctantly enough yielded the one, I cannot give way here ; Emily may, meanwhile, entrust young scapegrace to my care, and she may rest assured that under the pedagogue of my selection, Latin shall be well flogged into him by the time of her return.”

Herbert shook his head with an arch smile.

"She will trust none of our tyrant sex in this matter, I fancy ; if she is to be made an exile for my sake the boy is to be sent to the Tarletons. Laura and she are firm allies."

"Charming ! can't be better. I yield the wardship to the demoiselle, and give Emily due credit for clever diplomacy. Nothing like a woman to hammer Latin into a young dunder-head. They have, to be sure, an odd, pêle-mêle mode of climbing the ladder, ignoring Horace and Ovid, to say nothing of skipping two-thirds of the delectus, but they scamper through the verbs and declensions with the most edifying celerity."

"So, so ; the fair Laura a blue stocking, is she ? I had been used in days gone by to vote her a romp ; 'twas she, too, as I think, who was wont to 'rouse the slumbering morn' with her shrill, view-holloa."

His lordship shrugged his shoulders. Clearly he and the fair Laura were *not* "firm allies."

All was now speedily arranged for the departure from Oatlands.

It was a harsh necessity, but a hard trial, that parting between Herbert and the warm, grateful hearts that so cherished him there, but not a man among them breathed a murmur, not one permitted him to see, what it had been exquisite pain to him to have seen, their grief at his loss.

"Better his reverence try furren parts."

"Anyway, his lordship seemed to have strange faith in the mounseers."

"To his mind," Harris said, "they were most all skin and bone, looked as if you could blow 'em away, as indeed his countrymen had done pretty effectually not a hundred years ago. Now if Master Malgrove could get atop o' the Swiss mountains, t'other side o' the country, he'd say something to his chance."

The more enlightened among the gentry in and about Oatlands looked grave when they spoke of their pastor, and thought it high time something were done. "He had been sinking all through the late dreary winter; ere long the 'bowl would be broken at the fountain.'

Mdlle. de Malcé proceeded with Madame St. Géran to the retirement of Twickenham—retirement in reality now, for so deeply had the young girl sorrowed over Malgrove's altered health that she had little heart for gaieties, even if they had not under the circumstances been strangely out of place.

Malgrove and Emily are with Castleton in Park Lane. It is the last night of Herbert's stay in England, yet his friend is not with him, he is closeted with Lady Constance Greville. He had found her alone, and as he fancied in a sadder mood than was usual with her; he did

not know how much depressed she had been of late. She looked up with some surprise as he entered, for it was late even for so old a friend to pay a visit, and her fears instantly took alarm from the profound melancholy of his countenance.

"Florence is well, Stratford?"

"A thousand thanks, quite."

It was a plain answer to a plain question, yet he seemed to have replied at random.

"Then you are ill?"

"No, I am well; but ill at ease; I confess. I have been much moved, dear Constance, and not causelessly; oh, not causelessly! for I am on the eve of bidding farewell to the best and bravest heart that ever warmed the breast of man."

A faint blush stole to the lady's cheek, as she tremulously inquired if Herbert were leaving England.

"He is; and heaven forefend my prediction be verefied, but I fear for ever; there is that about him which seems to whisper that in this world our separation is eternal."

"You do not mean that he abandons his country for ever?"

"He is abandoned by one in it, Constance, who knows not, who *cannot* know, the value of the heart she rejects: but I meant to infer that

Herbert was, I fear, journeying to another and a better country."

If these words were spoken in a saddened tone, there was sternness in them too. A tear trembled in the lady's eye, and her little foot beat the ground with a quick and nervous motion.

"I—I should indeed regret this; I cannot tell you how deeply."

Castleton's gaze was fixed intently upon her changing cheek, he literally looked her through and through. His next words had a grave, even solemn earnestness in them, that *should* have reached the heart's core of his listener.

"And is regret the only feeling with which the loss of Herbert Malgrove would affect the Lady Constance?"

She moved the shade lower over the lamp, turning half round to avoid his direct gaze, as she falteringly said, "No mere words could give expression to my grief at so fatal an event; but I pray that, I—I believe your affection overrates the danger."

"Those only," he returned more gently, "who know Constance Greville can truly judge what must be the feelings of him who, having aspired to the possession of such a treasure, is compelled for ever to resign it."

Venerating as Castleton did the pure and

noble character of Constance, his countenance insensibly became the mirror of his feelings, and so faithfully were these portrayed, as he lingered with the loving warmth of lang syne over these words, that for one moment, one brief and rapturous moment, she forgot the ardour of his passion for another, and could half have dreamed herself the object of it.

With a long-drawn, quivering sigh she roused from her delusion, closing her eyes upon the burning drops that had gathered to them, as the bright vision of Florence de Malcé swam before her sight. And it was well for the dignity of womanhood that those burning tears were set down to an awakening interest for Malgrove rather than to their true source.

Amid all his surprise at this lady's rejection of his friend, the probability of her preference for another had never occurred to Lord Castleton, still less that he himself could be its object.

What an anomoly was this man ; so gentle, yet so stern ; so proud, yet so utterly free from the faintest perception of egotism !

Well, whatsoever the source of her emotion, emotion it was, and this his lordship at once placed to Herbert's account. Startled into a transport of joy at the thought, he knelt at her feet.

“ Oh, Constance! dear, dearest Constance, on my knees let me implore you to revoke your decision ; to weigh well the worth of such a being as Herbert Malgrove ere you cast from you for ever a heart which not the wealth of worlds can purchase !”

A sigh, almost a groan, was the sole response to this passionate appeal ; still Castleton pursued his imagined advantage, fondly dreaming he should yet prevail.

“ Forgive me if I distress you, yet listen, I do conjure you. Malgrove loves you, sweet Constance, loves you with all the ardour of a first and most passionate attachment ; from boyhood has your image blended itself with his fondest, holiest aspirations ; the one bright star in his otherwise lonely existence. Constance, dear Constance ! rive not his noble heart, trample not on his already wounded spirit, for my sake, for his, and, oh, dear girl, for your own, do not send him forth a solitary and broken-spirited wanderer.”

In the fervour of his appeal Castleton still held the hand of the agitated girl fast locked within his own. Suddenly its quick pulsations ceased, and her head fell forward, but keenly alive to the awkwardness no less than the misery of her situation, she almost immediately rallied. Something akin to a sense of injury,

too, helped her fainting courage. Was it not enough that she nourished the withering conviction of Lord Castleton's indifference towards herself, but that the added torture of beholding him at her feet a suppliant for another, was to fill to overflowing the measure of her cup of bitterness.

Little did his lordship imagine, in laying bare all the agony of his friend's soul, how acutely he was piercing hers. The knowledge of his devotion to another she had borne with the calm dignity of a pure and high-minded woman, disdaining to exhibit on the surface one trace of the suffering which yet inwardly preyed upon her spirit. But this, this was the refinement of torture ; this the "drop too much." A proud consciousness of unmerited wrong stifled for the moment every generous emotion in her breast ; it was only for the moment, in the next Herbert's ill-starred love awakened her tenderest sympathy.

There was in the voice of Castleton, whenever he addressed one of the gentle sex, a winning softness which unconsciously impressed you with the idea that he himself was profoundly interested in you ; Constance had too often recognized its influence, but never had it fallen with such perilous sweetness upon her ear as now ; now that she knew all its blandishment

had been called forth, all its eloquence enforced, in behalf of another.

" Speak, dear Constance, tell me you yield."

" Urge me no further, I entreat—I implore you. Ah!" she exclaimed, wringing her hands, "you cannot guess how I mourn your unavailing prayer."

" Unavailing! Unavailing!" Had his ears deceived him? Again and again he re-echoed the word, as springing to his feet he stood before her in all the loftiness of his stern, passionate, yet noble nature.

" Cold, obdurate, unfeeling girl! Is it thus I am answered?"

Indignation, the deeper perhaps that he had no title to betray it, took the place of all kindness in his breast. A deadly pallor stole over his face, his voice lost its insinuating softness, as half maddened by disappointment he poured forth a torrent of reproaches.

In vain! alas, in vain! She heard him in silence—in wondering, almost awe-stricken silence.

More and more maddened by this icy demeanour, as he fancied it, he paused directly before her.

" Lady Constance Greville! do you know what the absorbing love of man for woman is, that you dare, in these brief cold words, sign its

death-warrant? Do you know that this great, grand human heart, that you thus ruthlessly trample down beneath your feet, is bleeding at every pore with its deep, palpitating, unuttered love for you. Do you know, I ask, cold, relentless girl! do you comprehend, that every pulse within him beats for you, and you alone? and, if you *do* know this, will you, can you, thus lightly venture to dismiss him to his doom?" Then again relapsing into tenderness, Castleton once more cast himself at her feet; he clung to the folds of her dress, he imprisoned her hands, he looked imploringly in her face. "Constance! you dare not turn from this appeal with such pitiless and cruel words as these. Solemnly I conjure you to reflect."

He saw her lips move. "Nay do not answer me yet;—take time, take time—I shall die at your feet if you negative my prayer. Have mercy, Constance! Have mercy! Be pitiful, tender,"—and he bent low his head over her clasped hands, and wetted them with his burning tears.

Very tremulous was the voice of the lady when at last she gained strength to speak, but Stratford lost not a word. "I have heard you, my lord," said she, "with what degree of anguish I will not pain you by dwelling upon. Now hear me: *your* friend, *my* friend, deserves better of me than would be implied by the sur-

render of so cold and thankless a gift as a hand unaccompanied by a heart; and if I know anything of Herbert Malgrove, he would spurn at acceptance of the one if denied the possession of the other; nor would I presume to violate the sanctity of God's altar by the utterance of vows which my conscience tells me could never be ratified. Pray you, my lord, let us end this painful conference."

Castleton rose from his suppliant posture. He was ashamed of his urgency, but at the thought of his friend's slighted heart his soul died within him.

"Bear with me, Constance; pardon me if I have been harsh—but may not time—"

She shook her head. "Oh, Stratford! indeed, indeed you are cruel. Can you think so meanly of her for whom you once professed esteem, as to believe she would inflict one idle pang on such a heart as Herbet Malgrove's?"

"I take shame to mysclf, lady, in thus humbling myself before you—I could not do it but that from my inmost soul I believe I speak but the truth, when I tell you that the life of Herbet hangs upon your fiat; alas that it should be so! Must he—must he—quit home, country, his sacred calling, without one hope to cheer him on his weary pilgrimage?"

Constance had gained the door, but at the solemnity of this appeal, she turned once more.

"My lord, you treat me as a heartless coquette that triumphs in the pain she inflicts. I will not insult so dear a friend by an ostentatious display of the deep and inextinguishable anguish I feel in rejecting him whom you truly say is without an equal on our earth ; but pardon me if I venture to urge that in the fervour of your zeal, you regard the bitterness of his disappointment from an aggravated point of view. Fear not for such a mind as Herbert Malgrove's. He is too good, too noble, to sink beneath the weight of any earthly woe. Trust me he has better and far loftier hopes than those that hang upon a wayward woman's will. A brief farewell, dear Lord Castleton," and Constance was gone.

"Proud, insensible woman ! And is it thus I am answered ?" he exclaimed, as large drops of agony settled on his brow ; and his arms fell wearily to his side. "And it is to this Alp of ice, that your heart of gold is sacrificed, my poor Herbert."

Musing, as he returned home, upon the contradictory emotions the lady had betrayed in the course of their interview, Castleton could in no wise reconcile her agitation in the onset with the calm of her subsequent demeanour, and

when he alighted in Park Lane the problem was still unsolved, though he had arrived at that conclusion, which all men, sooner or later, do arrive at, that woman is herself a problem which it would baffle the skill of an Oedipus to expound, for though that gentleman exhibited so rare a degree of acuteness in guessing the Sphinx's riddle, it must be remembered that that was centuries before the year of grace, and he might have had his faculties quickened by the immortal gods.

CHAPTER XVI.

The bark drives on, though hull and mast be gone,
And thus the heart will break, yet brokenly live on.

CHILDE HAROLD.

AND the farewell is spoken ; and Herbert is gone. Few and brief were the words that passed between the friends, but oh, how the echo of that last faint adieu vibrated on the hearts of each, days, months after. Yes ; Malgrove set forth on his pilgrimage, with what musings for his companions only his own soul knew.

No more for him the “passionate tumult of a clinging hope,” no more of doubt, no more of fear, for the worst was known. And oh! the dreary void that knowledge left, the desolation it wrought in a heart so full of gushing tenderness as his!

Yes, all was over! To some spirits this “all” had been but as the pebble that the child in very dalliance casts upon the water, disturbing but for a moment its tranquil bosom, and leaving no trace behind, but with Herbert memory had no death. Constance, lost though she was, was yet more to him than the brightest of earth’s creations.

Friendship, it may be urged, still remained to him. It did; and it was scarcely a less powerful emotion with him than love—the more powerful perhaps that the tenderer feeling had been so coldly flung back upon his heart to wither and die.

If he lived, he lived to rejoice in Stratford’s wealth of happiness—but even here he rejoiced with fear and trembling, for was not that happiness at the sacrifice of hers, whose peace like his own was wrecked? for he dared not, and he did not, make to himself any source of comfort from those words of hers, “Take with you the assurance that the hand I have denied to the virtues of Herbert Malgrove, shall never be given to

another ;" there was on the contrary exquisite pain in recalling them, since they but proved the strength of that love for another, when she could, thus gauging its depth, so deliberately determine the issue.

Apart, however, from the faintest hope of a change in the sentiments of Constance, Malgrove cherished a morbid feeling that he was singularly ill-adapted to win the love of woman, such love as he had craved. With personal endowments of the rarest order, it would seem that he was wholly unconscious of, or attached no sort of value to, them. The fine powers of his mind again went for nothing in his own count.

Affluence and a lofty position he could not boast, yet both were really at his command through the interest of his friend ; but the want of these presented no obstacle to his mind, in connection with the opulent and high-born heiress of Beechgrove. He had too much of the ideal gentleman in him for the entertainment of such thoughts, nor, to do her justice, had they weighed a feather's weight with the lady herself.

No, he had through life coveted the possession of but one heart ; that was closed against him, and he had never sought, would never seek, beyond ; if he had he might have conned a fair

virgin-page that had well repaid the study, for there was one young earnest spirit that had been content to barter her true heart's homage for the poor requital of but one throb of gratitude alone.

And had Herbert never read her bosom's thrall in the downcast eye, the blushing cheek, the faltering tones of Laura Tarleton? Perhaps not; he had so little self-esteem, so little conception of his own power; or if he had haply guessed it, had he not already laid his fealty at the feet of another? True, that other had refused it an asylum in her own breast, giving him for all requital a life-tide of suffering. But what then? she was still hallowed in his memory, as none else might ever be. No; life's light in his soul was quenched, and no beam might henceforth break the darkness of that night. Well, he had enough of the old Roman in him to fold his mantle over his breast, and die in silence.

And Emily—did she not know that he bore about him some great sorrow, and did not her woman's heart divine its nature? She had been no true woman if it had not; but Lady Constance Greville was the last on whom her suspicions lighted as the object of his affection, for, in her own boundless reverence for Herbert, the idea of his loving in vain could never have occurred to her. No, the impression long fixed

on her mind was, that her he had loved lay sepulchred with his hopes, and an attempt to invade the sanctity of that secret sorrow did not belong to her.

Few, indeed, could look upon those pale and noble features, and fail to read the suffering they sought to hide. There were the traces of a mighty woe, struggled with it might be, but not, alas ! overcome, for Herbert was but human. There was calm, but not resignation. And yet higher and higher in the scale of social goodness rose the minister of God's gospel, quicker grew his sympathy with his fellow-man, more and more conspicuous his tolerance of human infirmity. His own private sorrow was never permitted to cloud the sunshine of others. On whatsoever spot of earth he pitched his tent he made himself a home in the hearts of the people, his sole talisman his wide-spread charity, his omnipresent humanity.

And how fared it with the Lady Constance after the departure of him whom she had virtually exiled ? Did no rising pang of self-reproach whisper to her soul that at her door might be laid the charge of a broken heart ? In the cold, almost haughty, reserve maintained by him whose image she had enthroned high above all others in her breast, whose image she so vainly sought to expel, did she read no reproof

that silently but surely taxed her with hardness to his friend ? nay, had he not emphatically denounced her as cruel and merciless ? And when heart-sick and weary of a world she had never too highly prized, she turned to the sequestered shades of her native Beechgrove, did she find there the peace she sighed for ? There, where everything in and around breathed of Herbert, the beloved of so many thrice loyal hearts ?

Oh ! surely not in the homesteads of Beechgrove and Oatlands, where he reigned supreme, should Lady Constance have sought balm to her wounded spirit ; there, where every word that issued from those lowly roofs proclaimed his virtues, and unconsciously took the form of a prayer for his restoration to them.

Would her entrance have been greeted with a blessing, could one beneath those roofs have divined that to her they mainly owed the irreparable loss of their friend and pastor ? With a heavy sigh she asked herself this question, with a still heavier sigh her heart responded to it.

If she had not before known the value of the heart she had spurned, that lesson was before her to study now. From the lips of the decrepid and aged, down to the lisping toddler scarce freed from its mother's arms, all alike

hailed her coming with twofold rapture as the presumed harbinger of tidings from "Master Malgrove, God in heaven bless him!" All plied her with questions respecting him, and she could answer 'Nothing,' and so, self-conscious and sore-wounded, she turned away from their doors.

The lowliest labourer of the glebe might hold communion with Herbert Malgrove, but not the lofty Lady of Beechgrove. Oh! too certainly peace was not to be found on ground sacred to him, by her who had sent him to dreary banishment.

From long habit the poor around had been wont to couple together the names of Herbert and Constance in one loving bond, for in large-hearted charity they had always gone hand in hand, and now it was with a strange feeling of pain, with a kind of wonderment, that Constance found herself, not alone constrained to plead ignorance of the movements of this early and beloved friend, but in point of fact to stand herself indebted to them for tidings of him, for Herbert wrote to one or other member of nearly every family in the parish, without much respect of person or even of character.

"The good, the bad, are both the care of Heaven," was Herbert's creed, and the proud satisfaction with which they would meet Lady Constance

on the threshold of the cottage with an upheld letter from him, while she stood without the pale of this privileged boon, had in it something strange as well as saddening. Well, if the shaft rankled in the wound, her own hand had impelled its flight.

Meanwhile the lady saw nothing, heard nothing, of him whose fatal but unconscious influence over her had wrought this twofold web of woe and mischief, nothing but what reached her through the public journals, for of the household she did not venture to inquire. And so life, to all outward seeming, glided on with the fair recluse as tranquilly as that of her own swans on her own sunlit lake. What a double-distilled deceiver is this "outward seeming!" what dupes it makes of poor humanity!

Mrs. Morton, who resided with Constance, was of a temperament that admirably adapted itself to her young kinswoman. True, she scarcely rose above the low-water mark of insipidity, but she was of a sweet and yielding disposition, content to float down the stream of time, leaving the world to get on, as, indeed, it very well could, without her; and if no ardent feelings were awakened in the breast of Constance towards this blameless lady, it is certain that in her own quiet way each esteemed the other.

CHAPTER XVII.

Like Dian's kiss, unasked, unsought,
Love gives itself, but is not bought.

LONGFELLOW.

It is the dull season of the year in town, and Florence, in company with the worthy but simple-minded Madame St. Géran, resides chiefly at her Twickenham villa. The world of visitors that literally besieged her town residence are considerably diminished in numbers, but she enjoys the quiet of the country.

The illness and subsequent departure of Herbert have saddened the spirit of the votaress of pleasure, and she no longer sighs for other joys than are to be found at home.

Not that the good old lady is her only companion in these sylvan glades. The Earl of Castleton has approved himself a model guardian; his watch and wardship over the recluse is vigilant as it is tender.

One week, one happy, hopeful week, has been stolen from his devotion to her and spent with Herbert, whom he has left, he sanguinely believes, in improved health, and his own spirits, taking their tone from this belief, are cheered

by it to a pitch that surprises and delights his ward. Thus, in the almost exclusive enjoyment of each other's society, their happiness is as nearly without alloy as mortal happiness can well be. Not the first flush of a bright morning that has ushered in a gloomy night.

Florence de Malcé was, nevertheless, perfectly sincere when, with her hand clasped in her guardian's, and her blushing face half hidden in his bosom, she whispered, "Ah, Stratford! Herbert was right, my truest home is here." For more than half weary of the brilliant scenes in which she had so conspicuously figured, she honestly credited herself with good faith in the avowal, and Castleton, like the brave gentleman he was, implicitly believed her. In this lull, Lady Graham's post of chaperone dwindled to a mere sinecure.

Her ladyship was too clever a tactician to join in any game where she was likely to be the loser, and so left the two to the bliss of their Eden—their "fool's paradise," as she politely termed it. Her presence, she well knew, would avail nothing till the love-fever, now at its culminating point, was cooled down, as soon she calculated it would be, by the commission of some fresh act of folly on the part of the beautiful capricieuse, now in all the odour of her virtuous resolves.

"Some great misfortune to portend,
No enemy can match a friend."

And so, while her foredoomed victim was leading a life of Arcadian innocence under the immediate eye of her guardian, "the fiend" retired, holding herself none the less in readiness for an attack whosoever good fortune should favour her with the opportunity for making it.

It was unfortunate that Castleton's devotion to his friend, leading him to resent Lady Constance's rejection of his suit, should just at this juncture have engendered a coldness between him and this lady ; but for that temporary disunion, the intimacy of Constance and his ward would have been more closely cemented, and how much of solid advantage to the latter had resulted from this intimate communion may be conjectured when the character of Constance is duly weighed.

One morning, at an earlier hour than might have been sanctioned by the arbitrary laws prescribed by etiquette, Castleton stole unobserved upon Florence, for she was seated at the piano with her back to the door, singing with exquisite feeling the pathetic air—

"Deep in my soul that tender secret dwells."

As the last note died away he leaned over her chair.

"‘My own Medora, sure thy song is sad !’"

"‘In Conrad’s absence wouldest thou have it glad ?’"

she archly, yet quickly rejoined. The next moment she had turned blushing away but for the loving arms that encircled her.

"It was not fair to ensnare me into so flattering an admission ; but you need not put on that saucy smile, as if I had really been mourning your absence. I had just been scampering through the gayest airs in ‘Il Barbière.’"

"Then I may leave you, and go down to the House to-night ?"

"Tyrant ! there is no House to-night. Ah ! how nice it would be to have nothing to do with the ministry. And yet, again, how more than delightful it is to read your beautiful speeches next morning, and feel so happy and so proud of—of my guardian," she demurely added.

Castleton gave a half sigh.

"It has an icy sound, that title of guardian, dear one."

"Strange you should think so ; to me it is expressive of all that is wisest, dearest, best !"

Still Castleton—the ingrate !—seemed but half satisfied.

"Everything," she went on, with blushing consciousness, "that is most eloquent of tender

and protecting love is embodied in it; then never quarrel with the title. Ah, Stratford, what were your erring Florence if she lost this guardian care?"

How eagerly was his "erring Florence" pressed to his bosom.

"My darling! my darling! forgive me; but how can I refrain from sighing for a dearer, holier title? Ah, Florence! wonder not that my love takes the form of worship, when in you I find every gentle and feminine attribute that can adorn and consecrate the name of woman; love in its purest and most enduring form, pitifulness, compassion;" and very tenderly he gazed upon her.

"My guardian turned flatterer!"

"No, sweet one! deep affection never yet borrowed the language of the flatterer."

"Dear Stratford! tenderness for me blinds you to my heaps of faults; no one, I do believe, has half so many."

Her mouth was stopped—we will not say by what process.

"I cannot have my betrothed maligned."

"Nay, I could point to one fair maiden to whom your poor Florence were but as the raven to the dove."

"Ah! say you so? You tempt your fate, for here I fling down my gage of defiance."

"I accept your challenge."

The gage fell at her feet. She raised it with a glittering smile.

"So stoop we to pick up our cousin's glove. Now, Sir Knight of doubting faith, tremble at your rashness, as I name the name of the peerless Lady Constance Greville."

A flash of proud indignation shot from Castleton's eyes.

"Constance Greville! Heaven defend me from the tender mercies of this most scornful dame! If this be your white swan, prythee fling back my gage and crown me with the victor's wreath, for of a verity you have failed in establishing the lady's claim to the palm of supremacy over my gentle dove."

"This from you, Stratford—and of Constance?"

"We will not speak of her, dear one! Cold and pitiless as she is, leave her to her pride and egotism."

"How can you—how can you use such cruel terms, Stratford?" and the violet eyes swam in tears, and, as Castleton dried them, he inwardly drew a comparison strangely to the disadvantage of the lady of Beechgrove.

"Ah, your warm, soft heart cannot conceive this, my darling. Why, this peerless Lady Constance can ruthlessly trample a noble heart

beneath her feet, and, curtseying with queenly grace, leave you with a—‘My lord, I much regret this.’ Out upon such peerless ladies, say I !”

“ But—but it is all so unlike what I have ever imagined—what you have yourself told me of Constance. ‘Trample a noble heart beneath her feet, and have only regret to offer !’ My lord, too ! She has never,” and the words came quiveringly forth from the foolish little rosebud lips, “she has never rejected you, Stratford, has she ?”

“ Rejected me ! Oh ! content ye, my fairy ; I would forgive her ladyship if only I were her victim. I am as tinkling brass beside the pure gold she has scorned. No, Florence, the noblest, tenderest heart that ever beat within a human bosom she is breaking by her scorn—deliberately, pitilessly breaking.”

“ Oh, Stratford ! oh, Stratford ! not Herbert Malgrove’s !—do not say Herbert Malgrove’s.”

“ Herbert Malgrove’s.”

There was a pause, for Castleton, sore wounded, paced the room with agitated steps, and the tears of Florence fell thick and fast as she thought of him whom she loved with a sister’s fond affection.

“ This, then, is the secret of his flagging health ?”

"Even so."

"And of his exile?"

"Of his exile."

"And Constance knows this?"

"Constance knows this."

"Stratford! can nothing move her?"

He shook his head.

"If aught of human goodness could melt the
snows in that ice-bound bosom, surely his had
never failed."

"But," she urged, and the sweet, pitying
tenderness in her face had melted a tiger, "could
not *you* plead for him, Stratford? I—I do not
think she could resist *you*."

"My sweetest! I have grovelled at her very
feet for mercy, clung to her knees, praying but
for the smallest modicum of hope, the faintest
shred of mercy. In vain!

"In vain! Oh, Stratford, it is piteous!"

"Ay, my blossom, it *is* piteous! it is mon-
strous! to think that Herbert Malgrove should
sue to this proud queen, and sue in vain! Her-
bert! with the intellect of a God, and almost
the perfection of one, too!"

Castleton spoke with the passionate vehe-
mence of his bold, earnest, and most generous
nature, and Florence dared not, at the moment,
venture upon a word in behalf of Constance.
At last she timidly whispered—

"Perhaps, Stratford, she loves another."

"Not she, my darling ; she loves nothing but the indulgence of her own insufferable pride. The melting tenderness that shows itself so divine in woman has no place in a nature so cold and self-sustained as hers. Young Love would fly shivering from such a sanctuary."

"But on what plea was Herbert rejected ?"

"Because her heart—save the mark !—*her heart*!—was untouched ; a thing so encrusted with ice that no warmth could melt, no compassion move it. Why the love of such a being as Herbert were a boon to bless God for on bended knee to the latest hour of existence. I declare to heaven I am prouder of that man's friendship than I should be of a world at my feet. All can talk of what they would do when nothing can be done. 'Words ! words ! words !' as Hamlet says ; but there are some men—and Herbert is of the number—for whom one might resign every hope in life, and glory in the sacrifice. But this stately lady can make none, forsooth ! Yet what were ten such silken dames to one Malgrove ?—the world can boast no second. But I distress you. There, let me dry these tears, and say you pardon my harshness, anyway, my intemperance. But when I think of him, alone with the arrow in his heart, I am chafed well-nigh to madness. Ah ! my darling,

if your sex did but divine the omnipotence of mercy!"

As the man of granite looked with his fathomless love into the compassionate eyes of his affianced, did no prophetic spirit whisper to her soul that these words were fated one day to stand in judgment against her?

"Omnipotence of mercy!" she softly, almost unconsciously, re-echoed.

Will Stratford Castleton bow his head hereafter in homage to the worth of these words, or remembering them, will he recall, only to scoff at and defy them?

"If, oh if," murmured Florence, "I should ever sin past hope of awakening this 'omnipotence of mercy.'"

Yes; they were harsh strictures passed on Constance by him, whom she, alas! loved with such fulness of affection, yet would she none the less have subscribed to the one half of them, and perchance have forgiven him the other, for none more than she did homage to the virtues of Herbert, and for the rest, so long as the secret of her love escaped his detection, she was quite ready to pardon his verdict on her ice-encrusted heart. There is nothing a modest woman so dreads as the discovery of an unrequited affection.

Whether Herbert would have been as easily

propitiated, may reasonably be doubted ; while a shadow of blame was suffered to rest upon Constance, assuredly not ; for incessantly he deplored the pain he had himself inflicted upon her heart, rather than deprecated the anguish she had flung back upon his own, and sorrowed over her sorrow with heavy aching weariness of soul.

“What we love perfectly, for its own sake we love
And not our own.”

• However blind Castleton had been, Herbert knew—alas, but too well—that out of her very tenderness for him had risen the cloud that shrouded *her* life and darkened his own. He remained, however, in happy ignorance of the rigid measure dealt out to the “lady of his love.” But though Castleton, from his strong sense of justice, softened in some degree towards her, he could not forgive her rejection of his friend,—perhaps, too (for who is perfect? certainly not Stratford Castleton), he resented with the pride inherent in lordly man his own signal failure in Herbert’s behalf. He had, as he said, on bent knee sought a boon at her hands, that boon had been denied, and in his own person, as well as his friend’s, his pride had been sorely wounded at the issue. If he did not soliloquize quite after the mode of the implacable Greek,

“My friend must hate the man that injures me,”

assuredly he did not love the Lady Constance the better for what he persisted in regarding in the light of a double treason, a treason to love and friendship conjoined.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A child's glad face
Is Heaven's own grace
Round manhood's stern existence shed.

ANON.

As one of the necessary consequences arising out of his friend's absence from England, the Earl of Castleton quickly found himself involved in a tolerably brisk correspondence with his chargé d'affaires, the redoubtable Mr. Hazlett, as also with one or two of the chiefs of the household at Oatlands, added to which, Herbert had made it an express condition with his lordship that he should run down into Devonshire pretty frequently.

Just before starting on one of these journeys, Florence, who was sending, through her guardian, a score of tender little messages to young Edward Malgrove, naïvely wound up with an ardent wish that the child were with her at that moment. His lordship made no reply, but on his return a few days after, he surprised her by

driving up to the door with the youngster, who, scampering up the stairs after the fashion of boys, was presently embracing the lady with the vehemence of a young bear.

"Here I am, Flory! Here I am!"

"Dear Stratford! How good of you!" murmured Florence.

"My darling! say rather how good of you to remind me of what I ought to have thought of without a prompter."

And was not that child's visit a rare source of delight to the fair mistress of the mansion? To see the two together, now singing, now dancing, laughing, romping! why, there was not a quiet hour in the twelve, except when, really wearied out, the little baronet struck into the field of inquiry, asking questions by the score, and in about as many minutes. He had attained a rare perfection in this art; the young Jesuit had, perhaps, made the discovery that this same system of question and answer presented a more facile and agreeable light to the acquisition of knowledge than the prosy route of book lore.

Florence, infinitely amused, commended his inquiring mind; his lordship would have owned to feeling just a trifle bored if he had been other than a Malgrove.

"And you have grown so tall, dear Edward."

The boy furtively raised himself on tip-toe.

" And how old are you now ?"

" Seven."

" Seven ! Surely not so much ?"

" I am though, all but eleven months and a fortnight ; what makes you both laugh so ?"

" If you were to reckon after that fashion in the article of bread and butter, and beef and pudding, Master Edward, you would soon join your favourite Homeric heroes in the Elysian shades. Eleven months and a fortnight form no inconsiderable segment out of the twelve wherein to starve the body. But tell me, what are you reading now ?—in Greek, for though his translator is a strangely fascinating fellow, old Homer must be studied in the original."

" Well ; I'm not reading anything in Greek."

" Ah ! I'm sorry for that. And in Latin ?"

" Oh, I'm going ever so far back in Latin."

" But how is that ?" and his lordship shook his head with the air of a pedagogue. " I'm afraid they don't half flog you, Master Edward."

" I should think not, indeed ; catch anybody flogging me !"

" But, my dear boy, ignoring one language, and going back in the other ;—this is not the road to fame."

" Why Laura doesn't know much Latin herself, and Constance can't even go through the declensions—why I can construe twice as well

as either of these girls. What should women know of Greek and Latin, I wonder!"

Florence's silvery laugh rang through the room at these words, and the air of superb disdain that accompanied them, from the judge of seven years all but eleven months and a fortnight.

"Ah, but this system will never do," said his lordship, very gravely, "the boy must have a tutor."

But the boy had now rested, or the suggestion of a tutor proved too much for him, for he was off once more on an exploring expedition in the aviary and the conservatory.

In the evening, fairly wearied out with their gambols, he and Florence sat down to be what they called really quiet. Suddenly the child looked up, a grave and even sad expression on his usually merry face.

"Flory, how many miles is it to where mamma and Uncle Herbert are?"

"A great many, dear."

"But how many?"

"Perhaps three hundred, darling."

"How long would it take to go, if you went;—oh, ever so quickly?"

"I should be afraid to say, dear."

"Why should you be afraid to say?"

"Lest I should mislead you."

"Oh! because you don't know yourself; but when do you think Uncle Herbert will be well enough to come home?"

"Very soon, I hope, dear."

"But how soon?"

"Again I am afraid to say. Are you so longing to see mamma and uncle, sweetest?"

The child's lip quivered, and he closed his eyes to keep the tears from falling.

"I should like to see them."

"You love Herbert very dearly, do you not, Edward?" said Lord Castleton, his voice unconsciously softening in the utterance of that beloved name.

"I should think I did, too, better than all in the whole world except mamma."

His lordship patted the boy's head, and mentally formed the design of taking him with him on his next visit to Herbert.

"Lord Castleton, why is not Uncle Herbert always happy like you and Flory?" he presently asked.

His lordship started, and seemed too shocked to reply.

"Don't *you* know, Flory, dear?"

But neither did the lady immediately return an answer, she only drew him towards her, and kissed him with swimming eyes.

"Ah! but that is not telling me why—that

is only doing just what Constance did when I asked her."

A frown darkened the brow of Lord Castleton at the mention of that name.

"And what did Constance do, darling?"

"Why, the tears came up into her eyes, as they do in yours, though she tried all she could to hide them on my shoulder, and then she kissed me, oh, ever so many times!"

Florence glanced across at her guardian.

"But that was not an answer, was it? And when I asked her why she cried, she wouldn't tell me, she only said, 'He ought to have more happiness'; no she didn't say that.—Oh! I remember now, because I used to say it over very often to myself— —"

"Yes, dear," urged Florence, eagerly.

"Well, she said, 'Of all living men, dear boy, he best deserves happiness.' "

"Lady Constance said this!" exclaimed Castleton. "Come hither, Edward, and mark what I say."

The child thought he spoke sternly, and stretched out his little hand to Florence.

"Nay, heed me, Edward; when you go to Beechgrove, ask Lady Constance this same question; you mark me; ask her why Herbert is not happy."

"Yes, I will indeed, Lord Castleton; but why do you frown so; are you angry?"

"I'll answer that question another time, Edward; but listen now to what I say—remind Lady Constance of these words of hers, and tell her that 'she who bestows happiness on Herbert Malgrove will best deserve that blessing herself.' Can you remember these words, Edward? they are not too difficult, are they?"

"I should think not; why I learn spelling every day—oh, awfully difficult words!"

"Very good; I am glad you learn something. And now tell me why you think Herbert unhappy?"

"Why, because often when he is alone he looks so sad, and sighs so."

"But how did you make this discovery, Edward, if he were alone?"

"Why, because when I wanted him to come and have a game with me, mamma said I must not disturb him when he was busy writing in his study, so I used to go and peep in to see, and he was not writing, nor doing anything, only looking sad—oh! so sad; it almost made me cry, once it did quite."

Stifling the execration that sprung to his lips at this revelation, Castleton abruptly rose.

"Once," continued the child, pleased perhaps

to find himself an object of attention; "once I asked him my own self why he was unhappy?"

"And what said he, dear?"

"Oh! I can't tell you that, Flory; but he smiled, and patted my head, and then we went out on the lawn, and had such a capital game at trap and ball, and I beat him ever such a many times."

"But why can't you tell Uncle Herbert's answer?"

"Oh! because it was an untruth."

"Edward!" from his lordship.

"Dear boy!" from Florence.

"Ah! but it was; mamma said so, and Laura and Constance too."

"Child! do you know what an untruth is?" gravely inquired Castleton.

"I should think I did too!" This was a stock-phrase with the urchin. "I'm not a baby now; but, Lord Castleton, I'll ask *you* a question now; don't you think Uncle Herbert very, very, oh! *very* good indeed?"

"Can I or any one think him otherwise?"

"Well then he did tell an untruth. Ah! I've caught you, sir."

"How so."

"Why he said (I am going to tell you after all, you see)—he said, 'I'm afraid, dear Ned, it is because I am a sad ungrateful dog.' Now he is

not ungrateful, is he? So it *was* an untruth. Ah! I've caught you."

Pained to see her guardian so disturbed by the prattle of the unconscious child, Florence seated herself at the piano, but for once her song had lost its potency; he even interrupted her—

"And my darling can defend this woman?"

"Dear Stratford, there is some mystery, oh! be sure of it. Why did she weep? Why did she try to hide her tears? Why does she so love this child?"

"Why, and why, and why? Is my darling running a race against yonder inveterate little querist? Three questions in a breath. Caprice answers the first two, the last is unanswerable perhaps. The love of children is instinct in your sex."

But here Edward climbing on a chair, put his arms round Castleton's neck, and coaxingly reminded him of his promise to take him to see the conjurors.

Fondly returning the little fellow's caress his lordship bade him run and get ready. By-the-way, love of children is a feeling not strictly confined to the weaker sex; we never knew a really great and good man who did not dearly love a little child. Anyway, most tenderly did Stratford Castleton love this one, though he *had*

stepped into the baronetcy he had so sorely coveted for his friend.

CHAPTER XIX.

Pray you, my lord, withdraw your suit.

THEY were at the villa ; Lord Castleton had just arrived. On the lawn stood Florence and her tiny esquire, he with a bow and quiver, looking no inapt impersonation of the love-god. As his lordship advanced he raised the deadly weapon.

"Now then, Lord Castleton, stand quite still and I'll shoot you."

"I'll be shot if I do, Master Robin Hood," he exclaimed, stooping his head to escape the urchin's winged messenger. "Because you have a quiver full of arrows is my breast to be converted into a target ? But now, having evinced your prowess in a cowardly attempt on the life of an unarmed man, your next step I suppose will be to rifle his pockets. I promise you the spoils shall reward your pains, though it is scarcely poetic justice."

Flinging down his bow, the boy flew to Castleton's side, and presently drew forth from amidst a shower of toys, a couple of letters.

Oh ! the hilarious burst from that young innocent heart as he read his own name on each ; a chorus of nightingales had been less sweet and cheery.

The toys fell to the ground, but the letters remained tightly clutched in the tiny hand. One was from Uncle Herbert, the other from darling mamma.

"Oh, Flory, dear ! I—I don't know which to open first."

She snatched them from him, and playfully hiding them behind her, bade him choose "which hand he would have."

"Right ! left !—no, right !" he shouted. It was Herbert's.

And that letter ! how each line of its broad bold text penetrated to the core of the youngster's heart. Not a word of commonplace, not one of counsel ; not a single hope expressed that he was a good boy; not the shadow of an apprehension that he was less than good ; but oh ! the loving trust it breathed; surely such love, such trust, had gone far towards reclaiming the worst of bad ones !

The swimming eyes, the flushed cheek, the merry, merry laugh, told of the writer's power over that brave young heart.

If that precocious little villain, "wicked Harry," had read that letter, he would certainly

have had another chance of escape from the devouring jaws of those "bears and lions that tore him all to pieces," and ended the Apician feast by crunching the bones by way of nuts to their dessert.

A few whispered words between Florence and her guardian, a radiant smile, and a "Oh, you dear Stratford!" and the matter would seem to be decided.

"Come hither, Edward ;—we have seen how you bear joy, do you think you could be man enough to control, or nearly so, all outward show of grief when the parting came, if I were to take you with me to see mamma and Uncle Herbert ?"

The child's cheek crimsoned, the cherry lips quivered as he buried his curly head in Castleton's bosom, sobbing out, "I will, I will, indeed, dear Lord Castleton ; they shan't see one single tear—not one ; 'pon my honour and word !"

"That's my brave young Spartan ;" and so it was settled, and though tears dimmed the eyes of Florence, as from the window she waived her last adieu to her guardian and his little travelling companion when they both set off on their journey a few days after, they were quickly dried at the thought of the mother's joy at sight of her boy, and Herbert's through hers.

During young Edward's stay with Florence

many fruitless attempts had been made to prevail with Lady Graham to allow her daughter to join them ; now, however, the boon was vouchsafed, knowing Lord Castleton's absence 'to be good for a full fortnight. And oh ! what a happy fortnight it proved to the poor lonely girl who knew no other change in her life's dull round than from the house to the square, from the square to the house, and heard no other voice than the somewhat harsh one of her German governess.

Yes, if ever perfect bliss was the lot of poor humanity Ellen Graham surely thought it had fallen to hers during that brief period, emphatically the "oasis in the desert." One must have been a captive to feel all the rapture that liberty can bestow.

The visit to Baden is over, and young Edward is about to return to the Tarletons.

As the carriage drew up at the gates Florence detained her guardian, who was to accompany the child, to entreat him not to leave Oatlands without paying a visit to his early and once beloved friend Constance.

His lordship was silent.

" You will, won't you ? "

Still silent.

" Stratford, if you have one tiny scrap of regard for me."

The grave expression relaxed into a smile, a very tender one, too.

"My darling must make a world warmer appeal than that."

"If you love me then."

And in the ardour of the embrace that incontinently followed these words, it may be assumed that the fair petitioner regarded her suit as won.

Lord Castleton had in truth no thought of putting further slight upon the cherished companion of his youth. Somewhat of his harsh judgment he had already rescinded, for the artless and unconscious prattle of the child had shown her in the same soft womanly light in which he had been wont to consider her, and he was furthermore deluded into the hope that she might yet relent in Herbert's favour. "How indeed," he argued, "was it possible she could hold out?"

Unexpectedly his lordship met her strolling in the grounds at General Tarleton's. His greeting was marked by such a revival of the old cordial tone that it sent the warm current from the heart to the cheek of the lady in a flush of crimson.

Edward Malgrove, keeping close to him, had stolen his hand into Castleton's; indeed that masculine hand of his lordship's had somehow

acquired a habit of closing over the tiny fingers, and now as the moment of parting neared, the grasp insensibly tightened, and his gaze was frequently and lovingly bent on the boy. Lady Constance walked on the other side ; presently she told him to go and romp with Laura, as she wished to speak privately to Lord Castleton. Constance always went straight to her purpose.

Castleton's heart gave a great bound ; "She was about to speak to him of Herbert—she had relented."

Constance led the way to a summer-house. There was a tinge of embarrassment in her manner as she turned to her companion, "I wished to speak to you, my lord—to ask you indeed a favour."

He looked up with the old love-light in his eye, tempered though it was by just a shade of reproach.

"And what favour can Constance Greville ask of Stratford Castleton that he can deny her ? for you perceive that I have not yet learned, as you seem to have done, to forget the old days when titles and ceremonials were merged in the dearer, truer instincts of affection. It is not so long but that I can recall to memory the time when Stratford Castleton and Constance Greville were to each other as most dear friends—dear, perchance, as brother and sister."

"And is it Constance Greville or Stratford Castleton that has elected to raise the ice-barrier between them? Can he recall no later memory when strictures, harsh as I will hope they were unmerited, were passed upon her whom he professes to have regarded with a sister's affection? and if so, can he not also fancy that these may have inflicted exquisite pain upon her,—once so—so favoured?"

She looked up with visible embarrassment, if not emotion, in her sweet face. What was it in the expression of his that increased her confusion fourfold?

What thoughts were careering through his brain, that flushed his cheek, and sent the charmer hope dancing through his veins?

Why this it was. Lord Castleton was asking himself what might mean the lovely light gleaming from out that lady's eyes—what meant that sweet embarrassment, the flitting blush, the tremour of the low soft voice, what did these convey—what did they not convey to his sense? This interview, too, was of her own especial seeking. Oh! there was but one construction to be put upon it. His harsh strictures she repudiated as undeserved; her heart had then at last relented in favour of his friend. What more natural? Clearly she was about to avow this,—in brief, to make him her ambassador to Herbert, if he would only help

her woman's delicacy in breaking the matter. In a moment he had bent his knee before her, and not alone implored forgiveness for himself, admitting how ill he had deserved it, but impressed with the conviction to which we have referred, he seized the small folded hands, and locking them within his own, pressed kiss upon kiss upon their snowy surface, as if thus, by the heart's homage alone, might he pour out the measureless abundance of his gratitude for the surrender of her affections to a friend so dear.

Lost in perplexity, and infinitely distressed by his vehemence, Constance besought him to rise.

"Not till you say I am forgiven for having so wronged that generous heart ; I should have known my early friend, my sweet sister, better than to believe she could doom another, and that other Herbert Malgrove, to life-long misery. Dear, noble Constance, forgive me for having so wronged your gentle nature."

"Oh, but this is terrible!" at last almost groaned the wretched girl, paling to the hue of marble. "How can I—oh, how can you have so misapprehended me? Alas! only as a friend, a dear loved friend, can I regard Herbert. Rise, I do implore you. I am most unhappy."

And Castleton did rise—mortified, almost stunned, but undeceived, wofully undeceived—at last.

Again, hurried on by his devotion to Herbert, had his better judgment betrayed him into a misconception.

He looked drearily, hopelessly into her white face, but there was so much tender sorrow, so much deprecating sweetness in it, that it awed him into reverential silence, if not submission. If she refused the boon of happiness to Herbert, too certainly she had not retained the blessing for herself. There was that in the expression of those downcast eyes that told of deep-seated though unspoken grief, and irresistibly appealed to the feelings and sympathies of Castleton's higher nature.

"Enough, dear Constance; we will speak of this no more. *He* will suffer in silence; and I must learn to do so."

"Stratford," she returned in a low, broken voice, "be satisfied that your friend does not suffer alone."

The words had scarcely escaped her ere she repented them. Alas! from the overcharged heart will sometimes go forth the wail of anguish! It was the first, and Constance mentally resolved it should be its last, utterance.

Castleton was strangely mystified; if he had been a vain man the riddle had been solved, but he was not a vain man, and a riddle it was fated to remain.

" You had, I think, a request to make," he presently said, in a calm, resigned tone.

" Yes ; oh, it is nothing ; why did I ever think of troubling you about such a trifle ?"

She spoke in a flurried, anxious tone, as if not quite knowing what she said, and he could not but be touched.

" Pray do not hurry your spirits, I will see you before I start in the morning."

" No ! oh, no !" she returned, rallying at once, " it is really too inconsequent a matter to bring you round. It is about poor Daisy ; you remember Daisy, Edward's pretty cream-white pony, the gift of—of his uncle ?"

" Yes, perfectly."

" Well, through the inexperience of a groom in attempting too high a fence, the poor brute is so seriously injured that it will, the general says, be a mercy to have him shot, and I was anxious to procure another pony, before Edward hears of the accident, as much as can be like poor Daisy ; the child will never love it half so well, but it is the best, I believe, that can be done. The general is just now away, and we women are poor judges of horse-flesh, you know," and she tried hard at a little smile. " Will you attend to it for me ? Thank you, thank you ; a docile, tiny thing, remember ;

cream-white, with a long tail ;" and they returned to the lawn.

" By all the amorous vows in Cupid's calendar but this is impayable," muttered the crest-fallen noble, as he mounted his steed and rode away. " A docile, tiny, cream-white pony, with a long tail ! And I to be the donkey to fancy she was about to pour forth a melting confession of love, and appoint me her envoy extraordinary on the occasion. It wouldn't make so bad a farce, assuming myself to have been the principal in the affair, that is, the lover-expectant ; not the long-tailed pony, nor the donkey. But there is some mystery linked with all this. Can my darling be right, that she loves another ? Yet, no ; Constance Greville could scarcely love in vain."

CHAPTER XX.

The rapture of her mind ting'd all she viewed,
And all seem'd beauteous, for she thought them good.

SHARON TURNER.

A BIRTH-NIGHT ball ! But three simple words ; yet what maiden of nineteen could resist their magic. Any way our débutante lacked the

philosophy to do so. Although a few plaintive sighs were breathed over her hegira from the leafy bowers of fair Twickenham, she but deceived herself when she fancied real regret had part in them.

Her return to Eaton Place was followed by an influx of visitors that left her without an hour's leisure. London was fast filling, and with silken sails and silver oars she was once more launched on the world's wide theatre, with, alas! renewed zest for its manifold allurements. Her "hermit life," as she soon learned to style her late retirement, but tended to invest them with a more piquant charm.

Digesting his mortification at this change of mood as best he might, that no cloud might shadow the sun-light of her he so fondly loved, Lord Castleton had tacitly assented to what inwardly he both dreaded and disapproved ; to wit, this spring campaign, so dashingly inaugurated by a royal birth-night ball. But, in yielding a too facile assent to the wishes of his ward, he had been swayed by the old fear. What, if by a too stringent opposition to her inclinations in the onset, he should, not alone alarm her pride, but even quicken her passion for the novelties of a world to which she was as yet a comparative stranger.

It is your high-mettled racer that will least

endure the curb, and Malgrove,, knowing his friend's ultra notions on all points of female decorum, had, not altogether unwisely, cautioned him against a too free exercise of the power with which he was invested ; yet Malgrove had himself been dismayed if he could have seen the entries in the porter's book within a month after the lady's return to town.

Her visiting list was not submitted to her guardian. In a seeming careless way, Lady Graham had intimated that it would but bore his lordship ; " there was nothing more harassing than these paltry details to a man of sense."

He might, it is true, have examined the cards strewed upon the table, but anything of an inquisitorial character was so foreign to Castleton's frank, chivalrous nature, that such an idea would never have presented itself to his mind as a means to an end.

Thus for a time he remained wholly ignorant of his ward's rather close intimacy with the Hon. Mrs. Seymour.

How this intimacy had originated Florence herself scarcely knew. In this, as in many another matter involving her respectability, she was indebted to the active but unseen agency of her unfailing friend, the Lady Graham, who well knew that, though holding a certain rank in certain circles of fashion, the notoriety Mrs.

Seymour had acquired was of so equivocal a character as to render her no meet associate for a young girl wholly inexperienced in the conventional usages of society.

It is true, no one directly impugned the reputation of the Hon. Mrs. Seymour, but the rigidly decorous stood aloof from the lady and her especial intimates. That she was a widow was understood, that she was still young, comely, and of exceeding fascination none with eyes and senses could fail to discern ; neither could it be gainsaid that her house and its appointments, her equipage, &c., were all unexceptionable ; but from whence the funds for the maintenance of such a position were derived none pretended to know ; most assuredly the rent-roll of her deceased husband did not supply them ; yet the world, censorious as it avowedly is, made no distinct allegations to her prejudice.

At Mrs. Seymour's house, too, Lady Graham was aware that Mdlle. de Malcé would meet just the sort of society that Lord Castleton would be sure to take exception at, for though the witty, and perhaps the wise, made it their resort, the idle and the dissipated were in a most disproportionate majority.

Gifted as was our novice with a brilliant fancy, a rare intelligence, and a constitutional

gaieté de cœur, she was captivated at once by this dangerous but most seducing coterie. Who that scents the rose suspects the canker at the core ? There were times, it is true, when her native modesty was startled by a freer tone than she had been accustomed to, but in general the exquisite polish that veiled the lightness of the jest, or the keenness of the sarcasm, blinded her to the real character of these soi-dite friends ; and her girlish vanity, already more than sufficiently flattered by her "success," as it is termed, in the circles of fashion, was still further elated by the incense offered to her own brilliant wit by those so much her superiors in intellect. In world-lore, heaven knows, they left her at an immeasurable distance.

Everything at her new friend's house wore so bright and cheery an aspect, it seemed so completely a temple for the laughing graces, that the fascinating hostess was asked if she had taken out a patent for the special exercise of mirth and good humour. Anyway our fair Euphrosyne drank deep of the Circean cup. The sunbeam that danced on the sparkling surface of the waters gave no index of the darkness and profundity beneath.

Who was to reveal the secret to her ? No word or sign from Lady Graham discouraged her frequent visits to this temple of folly, though

her ladyship was wary enough never herself to accompany her unsuspecting victim in these visits.

In lieu of the vigilant guardianship of a judicious and experienced woman at this most momentous period of a young girl's existence, almost her sole companion was the fond and foolish octogenarian, whose knowledge of the world was about upon a par with her own. And not a little amusement did the pair frequently furnish to the witty and unprincipled by the rare delicacy, the simplicity, and romantic generosity of their sentiments.

Meanwhile the purveyors of scandal, ever on the look out for their accustomed food, soon swooped down upon the defenceless and unconscious girl, who smiled upon her defamers with a sweetness that had gone nigh to disarm any malice but the malice of the slanderer. But what mattered it to Lady Graham, that "the unclean whisper of report" might soil that spotless name, so that she still wore her own ermine unstained? Was it not to this end she worked, to this end she set the wheels in motion, and guided their evolutions?

A virtuoso in the silent, secret art of defamation, she was herself the leader of a set, not indeed of the idle or the dissipated—to do her justice, her ladyship belonged neither to the one

nor the other—but of the ultra rigid, the “unco gude,” whose tongues,

“ Skill'd by a touch to deepen scandal's tints
With all the kind mendacity of hints,”

had, pitted against the party assembled at Mrs. Seymour's, carried off the palm in triumph. “A set,” to quote the words of Sheridan, “of malicious, prating, prudish gossips, who murder character to kill time, and will rob a poor fellow of his good name before he has years to know the value of it.”

All this, as herself the grand moving spirit of the clique, Lady Graham knew, and knew that the beautiful ward of the Earl of Castleton would be one of the first on whom their falcon beak would delight to batten.

The innocent gaiety of her heart would be misconstrued, wilfully misconstrued, and no less wilfully misrepresented, while she, the immediate agent in bringing discredit upon her, was screened from suspicion by Lord Castleton's strong prepossession in her favour, a prepossession which originated solely in his conviction of the sternness of her principles, and the subtle propriety of her manners.

And now the young heiress, startled into a delirium of bliss on once more emerging from obscurity into the blaze of fashionable life, went

on her giddy way, unheeding and unheeded, but by the devoted and, alas ! too trusting lover and guardian. As a rule great minds are singularly free from mistrust, and as a rule men are not the most efficient guides to very young ladies. It might be that Lord Castleton loved his “sweet imperfection” none the less for her follies.

Without one effort of her own, Florence had become the reigning queen of fashion. All she said or did was panegyrized, and with reason, for to all and everything she imparted grace and piquancy.

No matter what her goddess-ship wore, that instantly became the rage.

The show-rooms of Howell and James displayed the “De Malcé mantle,” Court milliners the “De Malcé hat and robe,” and the jeweller excited envy by a display of the “De Malcé tiara and necklet.”

She was the lady patroness of half the charity-balls in England, while no assembly, no fête, was held complete without her. Her vacant opera-box sufficed to damp the spirits of a host of male adorers, however much it might tend to calm those of the fairer portion of the creation. And still how little after all did she really mingle in the motley masquerade of life. Yet in the first flush of tender womanhood, she

shrunk half-abashed from the conspicuous place assigned her, and however gratified by the homage her loveliness excited, unconsciously rebuking, by her own innate purity, the faintest approach to levity.

No. At this period of her existence, not the most fastidious judge, and in spite of his unspeakable love, that judge was her affianced husband, could have discerned any graver error than that of an extreme thoughtlessness, arising out of total inexperience. Only the mildew breath of slander might venture to assail her; against this there is no ægis.

A ball in Grosvenor Square, where resided the Hon. Mrs. Seymour, had been fixed for the evening of the tenth.

A few days previously the lady presented herself in Eaton Place, "like Niobe all tears." With well-simulated distress she read a letter to her "dearest friend," a letter purporting to be from her steward in the country (*where lay her estates*), begging a week's delay in his remittances, to allow that time to her tenants for the settlement of their rents.

"Now, my sweet friend," murmured the lady, in the most insinuating of voices, "will have anticipated the confidence I am about to repose in her, in asking the very great favour of a loan of a few hundreds—a favour no earthly consi-

deration shoud tempt me to accept from any one in the world beside, and——”

But the Hon. Mrs. Seymour was allowed to proceed no farther ; already were the young lady's eyes swimming in tears for her friend's distress, tears for the distress of her friend's hard-wrung tenantry. Her hand (the moment she could disengage it from the endearing clasp of the confiding lady) was occupied in signing a cheque for no less a sum than a thousand pounds.

Perhaps, as Mrs. Seymour's profusely gemmed fingers closed like a vice over the coveted treasure ; purposely out of delicacy folded together, she really did *not* know the amount, perhaps too, restrained like her dupe by delicacy, she refrained from pressing so trifling a consideration, though she talked of her note of hand.

Well ; she might have risked it—and been equally safe on the score of liquidation of the debt, for no document of the kind had the ghost of a chance of being preserved by the spendthrift.

The lady, however, was not suffered to persist in her honourable intent, for Mdlle. de Malcé was so shocked, as it was designed she should be, at the bare mention of the words, “written acknowledgment,” that she besought her friend

never from that moment to name so very a trifle.

Now to do her full justice, the Hon. Mrs. Seymour was of an obliging disposition enough, condescending withal, and it was not difficult to persuade her into any measure likely to advance her own interest. So the draft was honoured by immediate acceptance, and the prodigal obeyed to the very letter, for from that day forth nothing *was* ever heard of the thousand pound check. Well,—

“Honest men
Are the soft and easy cushions, on which knaves
Repose and fatten.”

Ah! many and many a like sum found its way into the porte-monnaie of the dashing widow of Hawley Park. Her steward must have been a rare exception to the general run of his shark-like tribe, exhibiting an unprecedented amount of reluctance to press hardly upon the labourers on the estate of the fair landed proprietress, for no remittances, it would appear, ever reached her or her London banker, assuming fortune to have blessed her with this last desideratum.

But this lady was not the only lady, this widow not the only widow, who traded upon the coffers of the heiress; not a few among Mrs. Seymour's choice acquaintance poured a similar confidence into her sympathizing bosom, making

it the depository of their domestic sorrows past, present, and to come.

But what was to be said for all this? If the gold and bank-notes, no less prodigally supplied than artfully angled for, failed to find their way back, it was surely less the fault of the recipient than the giver, whose words, as she slipped them into the eagerly-extended palms, invariably took the form of a prayer that they, these dear friends, would never speak, never think of them more; adding with her sweet silvery laugh. "Oh! you can't bankrupt me, I have more than the mines of Peru at my command, I do believe."

True this little piece of ostentation was hazarded to quiet the ultra delicate scruples of these pirates, parasites, and sharks, but she half believed it a truism. She had said the same to her guardian, but though he shook his head, he smiled upon her so fondly and so proudly, that her doubts, if she really entertained any, could not but be set at rest. "Oh strange perversity of the wise!" for who, we would again ask, was here to blame—this simple girl, or the grave senator with nearly thirty years' experience of life? He might have seen, if he would, what was patent to every one else, that in the warmth of a thoroughly unselfish nature, keenly alive to human suffering, she would beggar herself before

one heart should ache within the range of her power of cheering.

It was this lavish hand and tender heart that rendered her so easy a prey to the mercenary and designing, who mouthed gratitude as though they felt it.

“I will nevare remembare your kindness,” said that clever dog La Porte, of operatic celebrity, in his valedictory address on his departure from England, after having fleeced John Bull of half a million of money. “I will nevare remembare your kindness;” and he kept his word—he never did remember it, any more than the hundred dear friends and debtors of Mdlle. de Malcé.

Neither were these out-door pensioners all that unscrupulously availed themselves of the heiress’s liberal bounty. A swarm of locusts in her own household helped to work the mine ; but she believed, and never ceased to believe, that a more loyal, right-minded, and well-ordered household was not to be met with in the wide circuit of Belgravia.

It was now the month of April, and Lord Castleton’s parliamentary duties frequently detained him till a late hour of the night ; but no hour had been so late but he had sought his ward if the shelter of a parent’s roof had been hers, instead of living an orphan under the

phantom guardianship of almost an imbecile. For her dear sake must the strictest caution be used. The mornings were scarcely less inopportune for a lover's visits ; he could seldom find her alone ; and though they met in the crowded assembly, or the box of the opera, neither the one nor the other afforded much scope for the interchange of mutual affection, less still for tender, yet perchance grave, counsel ; besides, Lady Graham literally enacted the sentinel over her fair charge on those occasions when his lordship was present, and her cold, defiant gaze, for ever fixed upon her, chilled the very life-blood at her heart, she was positively afraid to look at her guardian. Her ladyship's presence had, however, no such restraining influence upon him ; more tender, more devoted, that very presence seemed to sanction a greater display of fervour on his part. He was proud, too, to let that lady comprehend the plenitude of his love and reverence for his idol, and his idol was in consequence hated with a supremacy of hate that sometimes even startled her in whom this hate was generated—startled, but never betrayed her into one false move ; her passions were perfectly under the control of her cool, clever head.

Oh ! surely no generous tide of ruddy hue ever circled through those delicate veins of

thine, Lady Graham ! Their currents must have been frozen at the source.

One evening, Castleton surprised his ward by an earlier visit than usual, earlier because he thereby hoped to find her at home and disengaged, but the splendour of her dress destroyed the hope.

He could not, strive as he would, suppress a sigh of disappointment as he embraced her with a kind of tender sadness.

"Yes ; I am so sorry, Stratford—so very sorry."

"Thanks, my own love, for the admission ; but you will not leave me yet—you will not deny me at least a few minutes ?"

"I must then, I regret, limit you to those few."

She smiled to hide her embarrassment, and perhaps her pain too.

Again Castleton sighed. He wished she had not smiled—he was so miserably disappointed himself.

"You were not wont to prescribe these limits to our meetings, my darling."

"Dear Stratford, be reasonable. Etiquette
_____"

"Etiquette !" How he abhorred the word, and he said so.

"Ah ! I knew nothing, cared nothing, for these forms and ceremonies a few short months

ago, Stratford, but I see now that they cannot be quite dispensed with. The obligations of society demand some sacrifices from us, often, I grant, made at a very painful cost."

"Would that I could think my darling regarded them as sacrifices; yet, even so, I am at a loss to penetrate the philosophy of her doctrine. Why make havoc of the heart's best happiness? why neglect socialties and home-endearments for the hollow smiles of a senseless crowd? why, why exchange the 'gold of Ophir for the stones of the brook?'"

Tears dimmed the eyes of his May-blossom, and the coral lip visibly trembled, still she made a faint effort at gaiety.

"Most potent, grave, and reverend signior,' you have failed, at least, in the summing-up of the case."

"Forgive me, my darling; I would not inflict one moment's pang upon that gentle heart for all that the world could offer. Forgive me."

"Stratford, you have spoken of social ties and home endearments to one who is bankrupt in each and all! Look round these vast and desolate chambers, and then vaunt, if you can, their social attractions. Embellished with all that taste and splendour, and, far beyond these, all all that your generous love could supply, they are yet deficient in the one charm which you have

yourself pronounced indispensable to true happiness. Where are the endearments, where the social ties, you extol?"

"Alas! too true!" returned her guardian, with a heavy sigh.

"Ah, Stratford! how often in the brilliant and crowded assembly has a sense of weariness—for *you* have not always been there" (oh, how his heart thanked her for this!—"impelled me to return, when the thought of these deserted chambers has struck a chill to my heart, and I have lingered the last of the giddy throng rather than exchange it for my solitary home, where no smile of welcome meets the eye, no tone of affection greets the ear, where all is cold and silent as the grave of him who sleeps unconscious of his child's desolation. Stratford! you cannot guess—oh, indeed you cannot!—how bitter such moments are!"

Subdued, distressed, by this touching allusion to her dead father, yet, by a strange contradiction, inwardly gratified at the sensibility it revealed, Castleton caught her to his bosom with an ardour that sent a thousand blushing apparitions to her cheek, while all her witchcraft of angelic smiles came back to clear the cloud from his brow.

The carriage was again announced. Alas for the instability of woman! The carriage was

summarily dismissed, and that evening, in its commencement so overshadowed, proved one of unmixed happiness to both. One of the few dies albus, destined long to be remembered—long, long to be regretted as a thing of the past !

CHAPTER XXI.

I admire wit as I do the wind : when it shakes the trees it is fine, when it cools the wave it is refreshing, when it steals over flowers it is enchanting ; but when it whistles through the key-hole it is unpleasant.—DEVEREUX.

ALONE in his library in Park Lane sat the Earl of Castleton at breakfast, but the timepiece, at which, at every quarter's chime, he impatiently glanced, seemed an object of far higher interest than that breakfast, though an Apicius might have been content with the delicacies provided.

“ Too early ! too early ! ” he ejaculated. Time always moves on leaden wings when Love sets the wheels of the clock in motion.

His lordship had been detained at the House till a very late hour the night before, and, for the first time, had passed the entire day without seeing his ward, and it was as yet too early to call by a full hour, and then the probability was

that he shoud find other visitors than himself there.

He sighed wearily, perhaps prophetically.

"Another year!" he soliloquized; "another year's lingering martyrdom—for it is martyrdom to know and feel that she needs a husband's strong arm of protection, yet be powerless, utterly powerless, to extend that protection to her. If I could but have anticipated this fatal request of her father's, all might have been remedied. Wedded, she had been safe; in her present isolated state she is exposed to a thousand ills, while the licentious gaze of every coxcomb who can prate his way to her presence may rest unchecked upon her. And how hotly she pursues this hideous phantom, miscalled pleasure! How eagerly she embraces each passing novelty! Yet it is plain her heart is not in one half of this mummery. With what exquisite tenderness she recalled the memory of her dead father! How delicately she glanced at my absence, yet with what feeling! Yes, she is drawn into this vortex through the yielding softness of her nature, but her real tastes, her real inclinations are, or would be, centred in her home *if* she had one; for she is right—she has none. Home is where the encircling ties of tenderness are met together in one broad focus of love. The gilded hall, whose lonely vastness mocks

the echoes of your weary footfalls, is not home. Yet it must be endured; for twelve long, weary months it must be borne with!"

Once more Lord Castleton consulted the time-piece. The frown on the brow relaxed.

"A brief half-hour and we shall meet," he murmured. "How entrancingly beautiful she is? How captivating, even amidst her wildest caprices! No marvel she wins all hearts."

The third quarter chimed, and Lord Castleton listlessly unfolded the "Morning Post." His attention, wandering at first, became suddenly fixed. An exclamation of horror escaped him as, with the rapidity of lightning, his eye ran over the following paragraph:—

"ACCIDENT IN ROTTEN Row.—The world of fashion had like to have been thrown into mourning by the loss of one of its most brilliant stars. The beautiful and accomplished Mdlle. de Malcé, sole daughter and heiress of the late Count de Malcé, of Château la Garde, while riding yesterday in the Row, was thrown from her horse. The accident was occasioned by a miscreant flinging a market-basket full in front of the fiery animal, which immediately began rearing and plunging with fearful violence. The young lady was providentially rescued from what might be termed the very 'jaws of death' by the prompt gallantry of Sir Harcourt Neville. We are happy to be able to state that Mdlle. de Malcé sustained but little injury, and, with extraordinary presence of mind, remounted her still restive steed, a thorough-bred Arabian, and was accompanied to her

mansion in Eaton Place by a troop of congratulating friends."

Pale, and fearfully agitated, Lord Castleton in a few seconds stood before the open door in Eaton Place. A row of carriages lined the way, and his alarm became insupportable.

"Your lady, Morris?" was all his parched lips could utter.

"Is well--quite well, my lord," the porter returned, bowing with even a yet profounder air of respect than common; and half the staircase, to the astonishment of the liveried lackeys in the hall, who had been accustomed only to the calm dignity of his lordship's movements, was cleared at the second bound.

On the landing he was met by the smiling Adèle.

"My dear lady is quite restored, my lord."

"Adèle, you are not deceiving me?"

He leaned for a moment against the banisters—the revulsion of feeling seemed beyond the power of endurance.

"Monseigneur may judge for himself—that is my lady's voice;" and, at that instant, a sweet, joyous laugh, like a peal of little silver bells, burst upon his ear.

A murmured "God in heaven be thanked," and Lord Castleton staggered, not into the

reception-room, from whence issued that light, graceful laugh, but into an ante-room, where he sat down to wipe the cold dews from his brow, and to calm his beating pulses, before he looked again upon the smiling source of this heart-agony ; but, as continued sounds of gaiety reached him, he seemed to change his intention of stopping.

“ You are sure, Adèle, that your lady has sustained not the slightest injury from this fearful accident ? ”

“ Mais, mon Dieu, monseigneur, est-ce bien moi que vous méfiez ? ”

“ Then, Adèle, you shall not disturb her. Later in the day, when she is freed from visitors, I will see her.”

“ Monseigneur has been much alarmed ? ”

The young girl looked into his face with glistening eyes. She was foster-sister to her lady, and loved her with all the warmth of her simple heart ; and she loved Lord Castleton, too, even from the very depths of that heart, and she resolved that no visitors in the world should come before his lordship ; so she glided unperceived from the room, and in another moment Florence was weeping on her guardian’s bosom.

Ah ! as she felt that bosom beating so wildly against her own, what happy, grateful emotions

were hers. "Desolate!" Had she called herself desolate, yet hold in thrall such a heart as this?

"Why, why was I not with you to protect and save you?" he murmured. "How galling the thought that other arm than mine should rescue you—you, my own affianced bride, from this fearful peril!"

Gratitude for this anxious solicitude drew forth all her tenderness, and Florence made no effort to disguise it.

"Dear, dearest Stratford! no alien arm saved me from fearful peril, for I have been in none. Snowdrop was frightened, but she approved herself worthy him who bestowed the gift." Again her smiling eyes were raised to her lover's, for he it was who bestowed the gift. "I did but whisper 'Snowdrop! Snowdrop!' and pat her pretty arched neck caressingly—so"—and she laid on Stratford's cheek a hand soft and small as Titania's—"and that calmed the docile creature at once."

"What marvel?" exclaimed Castleton, gazing in very ecstasy down into the blue depths of those tender eyes; "a tiger, in his maddest rage, had been soothed under such a régime. But this man, my love"—and the brow insensibly clouded—"who, I assume, will claim the honour the public journals award him of having

‘rescued from the jaws of death the beautiful Mdlle. de Malce ’——’

“Sir Harcourt Neville ?” questioned she, her head turning a little on one side with its bird-like movement, and just the faintest perception of a smile on the ruby lip.

The frown deepened, yet she had but smiled at the extravagance of his words, “rescued from the jaws of death !” Ciel ! what hyperbole !

“Sir Harcourt was very prompt, I allow.”

“So saith his faithful chronicler the ‘Morning Post,’ ” and the proud lip curled.

She observed it, and asked him with an arch smile “if he were jealous.”

“Ay, sweet one, most jealous of thy spotless name.”

“Is he not a brave and gallant gentleman ?” was falteringly asked.

“So the world esteems him, I believe ;—yes ;—‘Brutus is an honourable man.’ I, at least, were a churl to gainsay it, since I stand his debtor for more than I can requite if he but drew rein in your service.”

“He did all that was needed ; if Snowdrop had been less docile, he had, no doubt, shown himself a gallant knight.”

This was said with a timid kind of grace, for the lady was a little in awe of her guardian in his graver moods, but *she* did not know Sir

Harcourt Neville, the Earl of Castleton *did*, though not personally, by repute ; knew him for a profligate ; and in his code morale a profligate did *not* stand for an honourable gentleman, though he might chance to be a gallant one. Pity the Castleton code is not more in vogue.

"It is well I understand the full extent of my obligation to Sir Harcourt," said his lordship, a little coldly ; "for him, the proud distinction of having lent my ward the smallest aid is reward enough ; none the less would I kneel in devout gratitude, even to the man I despised, who had done so much."

Inwardly, Florence smiled, as she pictured that haughty figure at the feet of any man of mortal mould.

"And now, farewell, my own love ; one caution I must give ; one promise exact ; remember never, never mount Snowdrop again unless I am by your side." And amid the din of voices and the incessant rattle of carriage wheels, Castleton took his departure.

"Never mount Snowdrop again ! Yes, these were his last words, and a wager depends upon my doing so this very day ; why, there is nothing to fear, Snowdrop behaved like a darling. In simple gratitude, I must support my cavalier after his gallantry in my behoof, but oh ! how I wish Stratford had not said this." And

away flew the heedless, rather than the wilful, girl.

The number of visitors had yet further increased during Florence's absence; the latest arrivals were the venerable Countess of Ellerslie, and the envied hero of the adventure, Sir Harcourt himself, whose reception by the ladies, at least, was enthusiastic.

Sir Harcourt Neville was under thirty, graceful, witty, and the fashion, and though a profligate, without the meaner vices that so often characterize his order.

Many who had barely been introduced at Eaton Place availed themselves of the circumstance of this recent "accident," as it was termed, in the park, to venture upon a call of either condolence, curiosity, or congratulation, they little heeded which, so that the entrée were accomplished.

Towards three o'clock the company thinned. The Seymour clique, with but one other, the Countess Ellerslie, lingered the last.

"Do tell us, my dear Mdlle. de Malcé," said the very pretty and seemingly artless Mrs. Howard, "if the dark green cab, with its thorough-bred chestnut, that dashed up in such splendid style—just before your flight, I mean—was not the Earl of Castleton's?—your guardian, I believe?"

"My guardian; yes;" and the young girl's

lithe figure seemed to grow taller as she bowed with a proud and happy smile.

"His lordship drives a dark green cab?"

"He does."

"Yes, I fancied I recognized the Castleton livery, but I failed to catch more than a glimpse of the charioteer, though your windows are so delightfully low, for he rushed in at the speed of a winged Mercury."

"Swifter than arrow from the Tartar's bow," chimed in the invincible Captain Stanton of the Guards, a gentleman who knew everybody and everything, and was reported to be paying court to the well-jointed widow Howard.

"By-the-way," again queried that lady, glancing a little maliciously at the conscious cheek of the fair mistress of the mansion, "what became of your invisible prince, Mdlle. de Malcé? Did he vanish by the skylight, or is he still lying perdu in that fairy boudoir of which I so envy you the occupation?"

"If your attention had been less keenly fixed by the arrival of Sir Harcourt," said Mrs. Seymour, significantly, "you might have seen Lord Castleton leave the house at that identical moment, and with the measured tread of a chief mourner at a funeral, rather than the speed of a winged Mercury."

"Ah! ah! ah!" laughed the Life Guardsman;

"a nonpareil of an amusement, 'pon my honour, that of inspecting the entrée and exit of each fresh detachment of visitors through the loop-holes of a pair of drawing-room curtains."

No one had the grace to blush, though nearly every one laughed; even the stately Lady Ellerslie enjoyed this sarcasm.

"But it *is* a pity," he went on, "that you missed the great statesman, such a sublime contrast to Sir Harcourt's airy style."

"Between folly and wisdom there is often but the breadth of a bat's wing," said Mrs. Seymour, with whom his lordship was clearly no favourite.

"Then the bat's wing must in this instance be *very* broad indeed," insinuated Lady Ellerslie.

"Very good! by Jove, very good! The gay baronet, depicted as L'Allegro, would make an admirable pendant to his lordship's 'Il Penseroso'; but I believe only ladies sit for these interesting portraits."

"What say you," said Lady Ellerslie, "to the mighty Hector as a pendant to your Paris? or to descend from the heroes of Eld to our present somewhat degenerate era, bring allegory to your aid. 'Wisdom rebuking Folly,' for example; but I am afraid we are growing personal."

"Ah! ah! ah!" again laughed the ivory-teethed Guardsman; "very good, really! Yes, the Hectors *are* a trifle out of date."

"A *trifle*," da capoed her ladyship, significantly; "but the Paris-brotherhood is yet in full force, or I am much mistaken."

"Excellent, positively! As your ladyship insinuates, the race is certainly not quite extinct; but really, now, 'pon my honour, I never heard of any escapade of my Lord Castleton, really, now."

"May not that chance to be owing to the fact of his lordship never having been guilty of any escapade?"

"Why, yes; your ladyship's inference is possibly correct, for these entanglements, these little *égaremens du cœur*, are apt, somehow, to ooze out in polite circles."

"They are, indeed," returned her ladyship; "and to ooze in as well."

"Yes; 'pon my honour, very good."

"But these *couleur-de-rose* transgressions, these milk-and-water peccadilloes, are not at all in my Lord Castleton's way," almost sneered Mrs. Seymour, evidently resentful of the slight put upon them all by his marked avoidance of them that morning; "his lordship contents himself with rigorously punishing them when they happen to fall under his 'most righteous

judgment.' Hard words and hanging, if your judge be Page."

"It is a blessing his lordship is in the senate, and not on the bench, then," simpered Mrs. Howard.

"Oh, Lord Castleton belongs to the new school of moralists," said Mrs. Seymour; "Harcourt, you know, heads the roués."

"Yes; and they couldn't have a braver chieftain," said the gallant officer. "As for his lordship, the accident of birth made him a peer of the realm, but nature clearly designed him for a parson."

"Who is it," inquired Florence, coming up at this moment, for she had been with other friends in the conservatory during this rough handling of her guardian—"who is it whom the accident of birth has so ill-treated?"

But they had the grace to be silent, only the captain pursued the conversation:

"Not Sir Harcourt, Mdlle. de Malcé; I don't think nature's designs were frustrated in his case. I believe he boasts that in one single year he has been challenged by half a dozen brothers and twice as many husbands whose sisters and wives—"

"Silence, sir!" said Lady Ellerslie, sternly; and she turned to Florence with a low incli-

nation of the head. "Forgive this interruption, I beg; but craving Mdlle. de Malcé's pardon as mistress here, I would suggest the propriety of waiving the further discussion of such a subject in the presence of so very young a lady." She rose. "My dear Madame St. Géran, farewell; I leave you on guard," and bowing round the room with stately dignity, Lady Ellerslie withdrew.

Florence, in defiance of etiquette, with marked and affectionate respect followed her to the stair-head. There her ladyship paused.

"My dear Mdlle. de Malcé, I am an old woman, you will therefore pardon in me what you might perhaps incline to resent in a younger one. Lord Castleton is *your* guardian, and *my* old young friend. I have kissed him in his cradle, my dear; tell him from me that if he comprehend the moral obligation involved in that title of 'guardian,' he is inexcusable in permitting his ward to be the intimate of these people," and before the startled girl could recover from her surprise at these words, her ladyship's carriage had rounded the corner of the square.

With slow steps and an unquiet mind Florence returned to her visitors. At the door she paused, still further startled by what she beheld.

In the centre of the room stood the petite but very graceful figure of Mrs. Howard.

With the closest imitation of the lady who had just quitted it, she was bowing round to the assembled company, who greeted the exhibition with wreathed smiles of approbation. Motionless as a statue Florence leaned against the half-opened door.

"My sweetest friend," exclaimed the lady, halting in her performance, and flying to her. "what has that antiquated piece of stiffened brocade said to pale the roses on that beautiful cheek? I protest you look as if you had seen a Gorgon or a ghost."

"She is insupportable, positively," drawled the Life Guardsman, twirling his blonde moustache with a grace peculiar to Life Guardsmen; "and yet, really, now, I have not been so entertained for an age; I give you my word I have not. You have really lost a great treat by your absence at the opening of this inimitable performance, Mdlle. de Malcé; it was to the life, I assure you. Do, my dear Mrs. Howard, indulge us with a da capo."

"I beseech you, sir," said Florence, with simple dignity, "to forbear; beneath this roof, at least, Lady Ellerslie must be held sacred," and crossing the room, she seated herself by the

side of Madame St. Géran, and apart from her visitors.

It would ill have suited the views of the Seymour coterie to have alienated the wealthy heiress, whose coffers were at all times open to their luxurious wants, and a glance from their chief sufficed to intimate that they had gone too far.

They were now leaving, but even in the act of arranging their cachemeres and mantles the moments were regarded, it would seem, as too precious to be lost, and yet another hapless wight was submitted to the scalping-knife of criticism. But pained by all that had passed, Florence remained silent and abstracted, though Mrs. Seymour, with wiser policy than her friends, had seated herself beside her, and with her patte de velours was trying to heal the wound inflicted by the incautious but less dangerous Mrs. Howard.

"But you don't really mean to say that you have not seen 'la belle Amherst' since her return from Malta?" murmured this last, in liquid accents, to the Guardsman.

"Indeed I have not, but I have seen her French poodle, and that equally answers the end. I'm told there is scarcely a shade of difference between the two."

"Monster! I protest you are as bitter as a woman."

"I own the soft impeachment," returned the captain, with a bow.

"Well, but really, when she has such lovely eyes."

"Which? the lady, or the poodle?"

"Absurd! the lady, of course."

"Granted, and her poodle has lovely eyes, too, shaded by ringlets that cover as brainless a skull."

"Base slanderer! I renounce you. Do, my dear Mrs. Seymour, make this traitor confess that Miss Amherst has an exquisite mouth."

But her dear Mrs. Seymour was conveniently deaf.

"She *should* have an exquisite mouth to reconcile us to the folly that so perpetually flows from it," subjoined the gallant captain.

A rising blush on the fair cheek of her hostess effectually roused the Hon. Mrs. Seymour.

"Is there aught else that lies within the mercy of your wit, Captain Stanton?" said she.

"Mercy and wit seem to be but distantly allied," said Florence, in so cold, though low a tone, that even the unblushing effrontery of the Guardsman was stayed. Adieux were now exchanged, "for," said Mrs. Seymour, "this dear girl will have to keep her room if we stay any

longer, instead of winning her cavalier his hundred guinea wager."

"Ah, true! Sir Harcourt has wagered that Mdlle. de Malcé will ride the same high-mettled brute that threw her, and that within twenty-four hours of the accident. Let me into the secret, Mdlle. de Malcé; the chances of the pour et contre, and I may be a winner of as many thousands."

Now, Florence well knew that no such catastrophe as that of being unhorsed had happened, but weary and dispirited, dissatisfied with her self, perhaps dissatisfied with her friends, she did not pause to contradict it, and it was with a sigh of real relief that, as the clatter of the last carriage wheels died away, she clasped her aged friend in her arms, crying, "Ah, mamma, darling, I think we will go back to our hermitage, we were happier there!"

The "Morning Post" had not thrown more than the usual quantum of romance common to these cases over the accident in the park, and yet the "Morning Post" made "much ado about nothing." When Mdlle. de Malcé's beautiful little thorough-bred, startled by the dastardly attack upon it, took to plunging, Florence, relying upon the rare instinct of the animal, had calmed it in the manner she described, never for a single instant letting go the bridle, or losing

her presence of mind ; yet it was true that Sir Harcourt Neville had seized the bridle on the moment, and having duly so-ho'd ! so-ho'd the mare out of her terror, received the graceful acknowledgments of the lady and her party, as though for higher services.

It was no fault of her knight that there was no hair-breadth escape from a frightful death from which to rescue the lady, there could be no doubt he would have run any amount of risk if the risk had been there ; but failing this, he was fain to do, what better and wiser men may perchance have done before, make the most he could of a very tame affair, and the "Morning Post" acted on precisely the same principle.

It was also quite true that, in the enthusiasm of his admiration for the undoubted presence of mind displayed by the fair equestrian, Sir Harcourt had hazarded a hundred guineas on the venture that she would next day ride the self-same animal.

But all profligate though he was, he had lost the wager tenfold rather than have won it at the cost of a single sigh from the generous girl, who, finding herself placed in so conspicuous a position by the exaggerated reports in circulation, had so much preferred to remain in quiet at home.

But without an adviser (for Mamma St. Géran's indulgence was in strange excess of her

prudence) the odds were a hundred to one against her discretion. Unfortunately, Florence was but too prone to imagine that the motive sanctified the deed ; she reasoned from the heart rather than the head, and a warm heart is generally at a discount against a cool head. A sense of ungraciousness in absenting herself from the ride, struggled with a vain consciousness of impropriety in going ; but in the end, kindly feeling prevailed over prudence. Sir Harcourt had sought to do her good service, perhaps he had done so, anyway she should be the last to make light of it, and to suffer him to lose a hundred guineas, when by so slight an exertion she could prevent it, were scarcely fair requital, and so Snowdrop was trotted out, the baronet won the wager, and the town, proverbially liberal of its gifts, especially when the article is spurious, forthwith enrolled the said baronet in the catalogue of the young lady's adorers.

CHAPTER XXII.

Be to her virtues very kind,
Be to her faults a little blind.

THE life of a great and good statesman—and the one is, or should be, identical with the other—can

scarcely be termed a sinecure, and if the Earl of Castleton, in the face of a contrary opinion in the political world, repudiated in his own person all claim to either title, he realized, at least, one broad fact, that his time and attention were equally absorbed by the work carved out for him during the present session.

A prey to anxiety touching yet nearer and dearer interests than the interests of the state, the sigh of regret would sometimes escape him at the thought of all the sacrifices therein involved, but the honesty of the man, and the dignity of the legislator, alike forbade his withdrawal from duties to which he was virtually pledged, no matter how onerous the task.

With difficulty he had managed to reserve an hour for more welcome service than state service on the evening of the day on which he had called on his ward, and found her overwhelmed with a crowd of visitors, eager with inquiries after her accident, but a second time the fates were adverse, and he was doomed to disappointment.

On reaching Eaton Place a brief but affectionate note from Florence, pleading indisposition in excuse for not seeing him, though shaped under the mild form of headache, sufficed to fill a mind already on the rack, with unutterable anxiety.

Yes ; his ward had pleaded headache, no faithless plea, to avoid a meeting with her guardian,

and with equal truth might she have added a heartache, too. It was the first time she had ever shrunk from an interview with him.

And why did she do so now? She could not answer the question satisfactorily. The whisperings of her heart upbraided her with having acted in direct opposition to what she knew to be his wishes.

It was not the simple prohibition to ride Snowdrop again without his escort, but intuitively she understood that he had felt the necessity of his presence as a matter of protection in more senses than one. And yet, in defiance of all, she had disobeyed him, she had taken her usual ride in the park, and not without a dawning consciousness in her mind that those for whom the sacrifice had been made were scarcely worth it, that a tone of levity was beginning to be mingled with the high-flown compliments paid her by her new friends, that jarred upon that nicer sense of propriety that, with all her whims and vivacity, was yet so strong within her.

Then this message with which she was charged from Lady Ellerslie. How could she be the bearer of such a one to her guardian? It involved a tacit condemnation of herself, no less than of her friends, but it was of them she thought, not of herself; however faulty, was it for her to denounce them, and to her guardian above all?

for her to draw down his censure upon them, which most she dreaded for herself ? She must despise herself if she could do this, yet how, without disingenuousness, and that was so foreign to her nature, evade it ?

Ah, who among us, of whatsoever grade and station, is exempt from sorrow ? Already was its raven wing spanning the clouded welkin of life with the envied heiress.' A throbbing head and an aching heart were that night couched upon a bed of down. Truly, the plea of indisposition was no feint, but Castleton knew nothing of the mental disquietude of his ward, and only pitying tenderness and a yearning solicitude to look again upon her fair sweet face were in his heart as he very slowly retraced his steps.

On the library table lay a letter, sealed with the Ellerslie crest. Listlessly enough was it raised and opened ; not as listlessly was it perused.

It ran as follows :—

“ MY DEAR LORD CASTLETON,

“ On your return to England, barely a twelve-month since, you honoured me with a confidence involving your deepest and dearest interests.

“ From your lips I learned that to you had been consigned, not alone the guardianship of the orphan daughter of the late Count de Malcé, but that you stood in the tenderer and holier light

of her affianced husband. Subsequently, I saw this young lady, saw her beautiful ;—alas ! perilously beautiful !—highly gifted, yet guileless beyond imagining, and I rejoiced that the son of my old friend was her guardian, rejoiced still more that he was her destined husband, for I felt that the happiness of each was thereby insured.

“ But now, my lord, assuming the privilege of age and friendship combined, I venture to put a plain blunt question, and ask you if you think you are discharging your duty in either the one capacity or the other, in giving your sanction to an intimacy, on the part of your ward, with persons of so equivocal a repute as those with whom I beheld her yesterday and to-day, both at home and abroad. I allude to Mrs. Seymour, *late* of Hartley Park, and her clique.

“ Without ranking among the positively depraved, these people, while wearing a goodly outside, are rotten at the core. The good *do* not know them, the would-be good *will* not know them, yet innocence, in the person of your ward, clasps them by the hand, and thinks no ill, because she knows it not.

“ A month hence, and London will be at its maddest ; and is it to such a moral asphyxia you would consign a motherless and fatherless girl, solemnly committed to your charge ?

"Rouse yourself, my lord, and if you still delay to confer upon this strangely deserted orphan the name which must secure to her universal respect, at least, in simple justice to the trust you have accepted, extend to her the protecting arm which your right of guardianship imposes, and which her sex and defenceless position so imperiously claim"—but Lord Castleton could read no farther. Every pulse within him throbbed well-nigh to bursting.

Delay! He delay to make this idolized being his by the holiest of ties! This was intolerable; and for a moment the proud spirit rose against her ladyship's strictures, not alone as a dire injustice, but as a positive insult; but he constrained himself to read on.

"One word more, my dear Lord Castleton. You cannot but be sensible that this delay in the fulfilment of your nuptial contract is calculated to expose the fair name of your ward to invidious comment, and that of the 'Countess Castleton' should be spotless as new-fallen snow. Cæsar's wife, you know—should be above suspicion."

"*Should* be!—*Shall* be!" burst forth the indignant noble, "ay, stainless as the angels of Heaven, and stainless as these is she, my pearl! my peerless, precious one! Who shall dare assail that name by a breath? Oh, she is all purity! It looks from out the dewy sweetness

of her lustrous eye, it speaks in the liquid melody of her low soft voice, in the thousand blushing apparitions that light up her transparent cheek!—And yet! and yet! oh, Heaven! how hardly may the whitest chastity escape the deadly grasp of calumny! Yes; this must be looked to.

“ Oh, De Malcé! dear and noble friend! would that you had better comprehended the workings of that great social machine which men call society; better far you had immured your child within the walls of a nunnery than cast her thus loose upon it. Denied a husband's right to shield her from ill, who may calculate the consequences? and yet these misgivings are an offence to her in their very breathing. Why must she live the life of a recluse? What is virtue if it need a sentinel? I should not care to place a guard of honour over my wife,” and the scorn of the proud features was rather intensified than softened. “ But I will see Lady Ellerslie at once,” and to Lady Ellerslie's he went.

* * * *

“ You do, indeed, surprise me, my dear Castleton,” said her ladyship, after listening to his exposition of the clause in the late count's will, interdicting the nuptials for the period of nearly

two years from the time of his lordship's assuming the guardianship of his daughter. "That a man of such scrupulous delicacy, and of so acute an intellect as you describe, should have been blind to the dangers to which a young untrained girl; and an orphan, must necessarily be exposed on her introduction to a world wherein, if much good be found, evil is, I fear, in the ascendant, passes my comprehension. And no female relative, you say, belonging to her?"

"None, not one; nor friend—in England," returned his lordship gloomily.

"Except," added Lady Ellerslie, faintly smiling, "that very worthy, but semi-demented old lady who smiles, and nods approval of all and everything around her, while you, her legal guardian, though so qualified on all important points to direct and influence your ward, can hardly, by virtue of your sex and age, be entrusted with the regulation of the minor ones; you cannot well," she continued, archly smiling, "install yourself groom of the chambers, mistress of the robes, and controller general of the menus plaisirs; the most significant after all, perhaps, as really requiring most tact in their conduct. No; the *savoir faire* of a woman of refined taste, but above all, of sound heart and understanding, is so indispensable in this case, that though all the virtues under the sun were concentrated in

your single self this want could alone be supplied by a woman."

"But," interrupted Castleton, "foreseeing all this, I had appealed to Lady Graham. No one I knew was better versed in the proprieties of life."

"She *should* be," returned the countess, with just a flavour of irony in her tone, "for she has practised them to the verge of austerity these sixteen years. Yes, she is de rigeur in these matters. There is one point, however, on which I confess I differ wholly from the view her ladyship takes, I mean in the matter of this suppression of all rumour of an alliance between you and Mdlle. de Malcé. Your constant attendance upon her at home and abroad, your unremitting attentions, can scarcely pass unnoticed, and these unexplained, cannot but operate prejudicially to her. No, I own myself in the dark as to her motive in keeping up a mystery here; nevertheless, before I venture upon a decided opinion, I will throw into the argument all the weight of my poor wit and wisdom, small count jointly, in aid of your far subtler judgment, and it may be her ladyship's, for it is undeniable that this untoward delay throws strange difficulties in the way; meanwhile, on whatsoever course you may hereafter determine on this head, lose no time in effecting a dissolution of partnership between

your ward and the house of Seymour and Company. It is unaccountable that you should have been in ignorance of this intimacy."

"It is yet more unaccountable that I should have been altogether ignorant of this Mrs. Seymour's very existence. Divorced, you say, from her late husband?"

"No, separated by mutual arrangement; all the world would have been cognizant of the fact if there had been a divorce."

"Enough," interrupted Castleton, with flashing eye, "the doors must be barred against her and her associates."

"Without a doubt, but check this impetuosity; I am glad you have the night to reflect. Openly to insult these soi-dite friends, were to do equal violence to the unsuspecting and kindly nature of your ward, while it would as certainly arouse all the pride and malevolence of theirs. We must proceed with caution. Meanwhile, tell her, tell your sweet May-blossom, that 'Austere Hall,' if she will so honour it, and the arms of its officious mistress, are now and always open to receive her."

"Lady Ellerslie! dear Lady Ellerslie! do I, indeed, understand that I have your permission to say this from you, that you will receive, that you will—"

Lord Castleton broke down ; her ladyship, too, was affected.

"Indeed will I, joyfully—at all times—all seasons."

"Lady Ellerslie, I cannot speak my thanks."

"No need you should, my dear Stratford, I thought we had too long been stanch friends to stand on punctilio. I told your ward I had kissed you in your cradle." And so they parted.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Ah! do not fancy that in lovers' quarrels there is any, sweetness that compensates the sting.—LORD LYTTON.

EARLY morning again found Castleton in Eaton Place, again, alas ! to be disappointed. He could not bear it. An imploring entreaty to see his ward, if but for a single minute, was hurriedly penned, and in a few seconds Adèle entered, his own note in her hand.

Her lady was sleeping, "sleeping," the young girl added, "for the first time since she had lain her head on the pillow the night before."

"Adèle, you deceive me," cried his lordship in a voice of agony, "your lady is ill ;" and lip and cheek paled to the hue of marble.

"Ah no ! for a heap of untold gold Adèle

would not deceive milord. Mademoiselle is not quite herself from want of rest and—and some little anxiety ; but this sleep, if she is not disturbed, will restore her, quite, quite. But what milord desires shall be done ; will he see Mdme. St. Géran ? She is always with miladi."

Castleton stopped in his agitated walk. "No, Adèle, no ! For your life do not breathe a sound to disturb her ; as you say, sleep may restore her ; I will wait, if it be possible, but on her awakening, note well how she is, and for sweet mercy's sake, if she be worse, do not leave me a moment in ignorance of the truth."

The girl looked up with tearful eyes, but her affectionate glance reassured him.

"I cannot speak my sense of Mdme. St. Géran's doting love, but—but she is persuadable ; and to save me, Adèle—to save me anxiety—your gentle mistress may prevail with her. Adèle, do you understand me ? It is on you that I rely."

"I will not fail, milord ; my hand upon it."

And a hand as small, and almost as white, as the daintiest in the land, was held out with simple, winning grace. His lordship pressed it with affectionate warmth.

"It were treason to doubt you, dear child."

Lord Castleton was a proud man, but his pride was undefaced by the smallest alloy of that narrow prejudice which undervalues lowliness of birth and station. If truth and goodness were in the ascendant, the coronet and the ermine weighed but as dross against it. Not a jot heeded he that it was to a soubrette he was betraying all the ardour of his love; that soubrette was the foster sister of his betrothed, had served her with the truest loyalty, and Castleton reverenced her as she deserved. To be sure, he had loved a dog that had shown fidelity to her he so wildly worshipped.

Wearily the hours of the day wore on—six—seven—eight; he would go.

“At last!—at last!” he fondly murmured as he folded her in his arms; dearer if possible for all the anxiety she had cost him.

And she was well—quite well! but she had to reiterate this assurance again and again before he could be made to believe that the bloom upon the delicate cheek was not fever.

But how transitory is mortal bliss; on glancing at her dress he saw that he was again fated to see his hopes frustrated; and so much had depended upon this interview—a revelation to make, a prayer to prefer. Yes, there was no denying it, he was miserably disappointed.

It might be that just the faintest perception

of reproach marked his tone as he gave expression to this feeling, for Florence, really halfashamed of her subvieny to pleasure, replied with a petulance she had never before displayed—

“ How often must I urge upon you, Stratford, the necessity for these sacrifices if we live in the world.”

“ Why, then, I would in turn urge, live in a world where these sacrifices are called for ?”

“ Why—why commit a thousand follies each hour I live ?” she exclaimed, bursting into tears.

Shocked at the effect of his words, subdued and touched, Castleton sought by the gentlest caresses to soothe her back to calmness; and, naturally sweet-tempered and forgiving, Florence was presently raining down most captivating smiles upon her penitent lover.

Flinging her mantle over the back of the couch, she seated herself by his side in all the abandon of perfect happiness ; and Castleton began to hope she had forgotten her engagement, and perhaps she had, or was at least willing to make his presence her excuse for forgetting, perhaps for forfeiting it ; but, as we have just said, happiness is transitory—a message from Mdme. St. Géran, reminding her of the lateness of the hour broke the spell. With ill-disguised reluctance, flattering to the tenderness

of her lover, Florence rose. His eyes fixed on hers, seeming to plead for yet a few minutes longer, were irresistible.

"I will join Mdme. St. Géran in a quarter of an hour," was the answer returned.

Scarcely waiting for the closing of the door, Castleton thanked her as though she had sacrificed the evening to him. How gladly she had done so, even he might not guess.

"It is so good, so generous of you, my darling, to grant me this respite. I have so yearned to see my precious one!"

"Ah, Stratford! whose fault is it that I go without you, here, anywhere?"

"My love! do not, I conjure you, say so. I will right gladly meet you if I may; there is no House to-night, and I will join you in twenty seconds. Where is it? you will insure me a welcome, will you not?"

Florence started, paused, and blushed crimson. Oh! there was no denying it; with all his wealth of tenderness, his excess of indulgence, the young lady stood just a degree in awe of her guardian.

Falteringly her words came forth. "I—I am afraid it will not be possible for you to go where I am going to-night—every card is, I know, filled up. Another time an invitation might be sent."

A light broke in upon Castleton's sense. In the joy of seeing her, he had forgotten all else. He looked suddenly up.

"Ah, yes! I know very well you will disapprove of my poor friend, though why, unless it is because she is most unfortunate, I cannot tell."

"Who is unfortunate, my love? I could scarcely disapprove of your friend merely on the score of her misfortunes. 'Qui s'excuse s'accuse,' n'est ce pas?"

"Ah, if wit, beauty, and elegance might plead against unmerited wrongs," urged Florence, but still in a timid deprecating tone, "she would not need my poor defence."

"Yes; wit, beauty, and elegance form a charming combination no doubt, but appraised even at their fullest value, they would soon kick the beam with unalloyed metal in the opposite scale."

"Oh! I know you despise wit."

"Despise is a harsh word, dearest; against satire I do enter my heartiest protest; nor will I aver that I am a very ardent admirer of wit—in a woman."

She laughed; a little, short, nervous laugh, so unlike one of her sweet, clear, ringing bursts that moved you to mirth though never so moodily disposed.

“Ah, the old prejudice ; ‘in a woman.’ She must not presume to measure her poor wit ‘gainst lordly man’s.’”

“That she were wiser to abstain from an attempt to do so, I am free to confess. I am half-inclined to agree with Lord Lyttelton—

“‘That wit like wine, intoxicates the brain
Too weak for feeble woman to sustain.’”

“Yes, you have favoured me with the couplet before.”

He smiled at her pretty attempt at a pout, and asked her if she would have the next.

“If it please you, fair cousin.”

“‘Of those who claim it, half of them have none,
And half of those who have it are undone.’”

“A melancholy catastrophe truly ; but I may have a higher appreciation of a woman’s mental strength than you and my Lord Lyttelton.”

“I know not what may have been the exact limit to which his lordship bounded his appreciation of it, but mine is so exalted that I would fain see it directed into far nobler channels than the arrows of the sharpest wit may ever hope to pierce.”

“And yet, Stratford, a sweeter poet than your oracle endowed one of his brightest creations ‘with a wit that could fascinate sages;’” and

she shot an arch glance from out her starry eyes.

"But why does my darling pause? What says the next line?"

"Well, what says it?" she asked, smiling yet blushing too.

"Nay, your own sweet lips shall tell me that."

"'Yet playful as Peris just loosed from their cages,'" she instantly subjoined, now fairly laughing, and looking as bewilderingly lovely as Nourmahal's self.

"Even so, my love, should it ever be."

"And can you think, Stratford, I would ever have it otherwise?"

"Now blessings on you for this sweet admission, my Peri!" and such a tumult of joy was visible in Castleton's eyes, that Florence mentally asked herself whether "the dear delight of giving pain" was not worthily exchanged for the power of blessing and being blessed. Her eyes were dim with tears as she turned them on her guardian, who with yearning gaze asked her if he must indeed lose her for that one evening, and then unfortunately he once more inquired to whom she stood engaged.

It was in a faltering tone that she gave the name of Mrs. Seymour.

With a foreboding that he should hear that

name, Castleton could yet scarcely keep back the start as she pronounced it.

Again Florence timidly glanced at the time-piece.

He felt there was not a moment to be lost. Go to this lady's, and under no abler chaperonage than poor purblind Mdme. St. Géran, she must not—should not.

Lord Castleton was by nature ardent, impetuous, and passionate ; yet loving, “not wisely, but too well,” he quelled the whirlwind within, and besought his ward to give up this engagement, to yield thus much to his prayers. But he had looked upon her too often with the smile of tenderness for her now to dread his frown, and wayward and wilful, spoiled by his own excess of indulgence, she refused his petition, at first mildly, then more resolutely, at last, oh, worst stab of all to the heart that loves ! coldly—very coldly.

Then it was that, stung to the core by this unlooked-for obduracy, with all the vehemence, and, alas ! somewhat of the sternness, of his character, fired by his instinctive abhorrence of even the semblance of lightness in woman, strengthened too by just apprehension of danger to her he loved, Lord Castleton denounced this Mrs. Seymour in such terms of reprehension as in turn startled and dismayed his ward ; but

the lady knew her power too well, knew too the generous nature she had to deal with, and rallying after a few moments, she proudly stood upon her defence.

Among other fashionable devices she had lately acquired the art of veiling her real feelings beneath an artificial show of indifference. She put it in full force now, and Castleton was wounded to the quick by the increasing coldness of her demeanour, and yet further maddened by the sarcastic smile that wreathed that beautiful lip each time she spoke. He forgot how much there had been in the severity of his strictures on her friends to provoke such reprisals.

To Castleton, who worshipped in woman all those gentle and feminine attributes which seek the shelter of retirement rather than the glare of gaudy day, the brilliant wit for which his ward was becoming so distinguished was anything but gratifying.

“Till she was thrown into collision with these people,” he mentally argued, “her exquisite modesty kept this fascinating but dangerous quality in abeyance, but they shall not sully the whiteness of her soul by their unhallowed breath.”

And Lord Castleton returned to the charge with but a very modified degree of wrath ; he did not pause to measure his words, and matters were not mended by it, for his May-queen,

indignant at the allegations brought against her friends, repelled them with generous warmth. The young are always generous.

To Mrs. Seymour and Mrs. Seymour's circle she had, by that unaccountable attraction which sometimes links the pure with the impure, become attached ; to be sure we must not too critically analyze the quality of her regard, but she styled them her friends ; she believed in the sincerity of their professions ; she served them too ; and it is natural to a delicate mind to love whom it serves. She interchanged visits with them, and the rights of hospitality, no less than, the claims of friendship, imperiously called upon her to refute these calumnies ; and her spirited defence of them, combined with her haughty refusal to concede the point at once to break with them, alarmed as much as it surprised her guardian, evidencing but too plainly the influence they had already acquired over her, and Castleton's lofty and unbending spirit was ill-adapted to temporize in a matter involving the vital interests of his future wife.

Having expressed his unqualified disapproval of Mrs. Seymour and her clique ; having boldly, however delicately, withdrawn the mask that veiled their iniquities ; he could not comprehend any further hesitation on the part of his ward to sever herself from them.

Now in Lord Castleton's severe and sweeping judgment on these associates, not for one instant was she, his worshipped Florence, included in it ; his tenderness *for* her, his confidence *in* her, were unshaken, and she knew it, yet she abated not a jot of her hauteur, as she replied, “ I beg you will not seek to qualify your scorn in my behalf ; I disdain to shelter myself beneath so poor an evasion ; my errors are my own, and the result of no evil counsel.”

“ I recognize no error in my darling, unless it be a mistaken and too generous indulgence towards the failings of others.”

“ I have been fortunate in not discovering these failings of my friends, but surely my desertion of them because they are cruelly aspersed were little to my credit.”

“ Florence, the influence of these people must be potent indeed, since to them you would sacrifice your own and my future peace.”

There was a grave earnestness in the aspect of Lord Castleton as he uttered these words, there was yet more in the next. “ It is impossible but that my darling, now her eyes are opened, will yield to my prayer—on my knees I entreat, I implore you to stay all further intercourse with them,” and he knelt in lowliest suppliance at her feet.

“ Florence, my beloved!—my life! my darling!

Speak to me—say that you will separate yourself now and for ever from these people.” His whole soul was in the deep, sad, almost solemn gaze he cast upon her: “ My love ! my life ! why, why will you not answer me ?”

And Florence heard him, and trembled, and wavered as she heard, but her head was wilfully turned away, and she did not see all the agony of that upturned face, nor he the relenting softness of hers, or the next sentence had never been spoken.

“ Spare me, Florence, I do conjure you, spare me the pain of having to issue a command.”

Oh the revulsion of feeling called forth by that brief sentence ! a moment before and the wayward but warm heart was throbbing with relenting tenderness for him. Now she turned round, gasping for breath, “ You do well to remind me of your power, my lord ; it is generous, it is manly ! You do well to bid me shake off the thraldom of the world, while I have to endure the far heavier bondage your tyranny would impose, but I presume no longer to dispute your prerogative—your commands shall be obeyed.”

She attempted to rise, but Stratford’s clinging arms detained her.

“ Bondage ! tyranny ! Have I deserved this ? Oh, unsay those words ! Tell me that you did not mean them, that they were the wayward

offspring of momentary petulance in my spoiled and worshipped darling ; that she but spoke them to try the heart she knows to be all her own. When did I ever exact from duty aught that she permitted me to claim from her tenderness ?”

He paused, still retaining his suppliant posture, but no relenting glance was vouchsafed. The “spoiled child, the worshipped darling,” as she had been too truly called, was not to be thus easily propitiated.

Haughtily she disengaged herself from his encircling arms, as with the air of a crowned empress she moved to the door, but her intent to quit the room was arrested in the very act.

Lord Castleton had recovered his senses.

No longer a suppliant at her feet, he now stood before her in all the pride of his glorious manhood.

There was much in the external grandeur of his fine form that unconsciously deepened the impression of his natural pride of character, and now, not stern, but calm and resolved, he wore the aspect of the judge, rather than the adoring lover.

“I sue to you no longer, madam ; but beware ! Oh beware ! how you trifle with me upon a point involving *my* honour no less than your own.”

And without a word of farewell, or so much as a wave of the hand, her guardian was gone.

"Yes, the dignified exit the young lady had piqued herself upon making, perhaps to try the extent of his forbearance, had recoiled upon herself. Lord Castleton had forestalled her; the shaft she had designed for *his* breast had pierced her own, and acutely, too.

Her heart, with all its wealth of love, swelled well-nigh to bursting as she saw him depart; but for pride she would have called him back; in its stead she did what a woman is almost sure to do under the excitement of overwrought feeling. She burst into a passion of tears, of proud yet contrite tears.

Ah, well! this would never do! he should never guess at her misery, never! she would go to Mrs. Seymour's in defiance of him, and this very minute, or he would be back at her feet pleading for pardon.

But minute after minute rolled on and Lord Castleton did *not* come back to prostrate himself at her feet and plead for pardon, neither did the lady, though her hand was on the bell-pull, ring for the carriage to convey her to Mrs. Seymour's assembly.

The evening wore away, and still her guardian returned not, while she, listening to every sound,

sat rocking herself in her chair, a prey to the keenest remorse.

Her judgment was scarcely at fault when she half leaned to the belief that Castleton would return. Had he but known that his idol, in her relenting mood, was rehearsing not alone his pardon, but certain words of tender compliance that were to follow, too certainly he would have been there, at her feet, pouring out his love, and it might be his penitence too, but all this he had not dared to hope ; and so with aching heart and throbbing temples he sat alone in his library, seeking with all a lover's sophistry to palliate what his truer reason whispered him he might so hardly defend.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Left and abandon'd by her velvet friends.

SHAKSPEARE.

“ AND did Florence de Malcé, in defiance of her guardian's strict prohibition, venture, after all, to Mrs. Seymour's assembly ? ” A simple question this, yet all important in the tenor of its reply.

It is twelve o'clock, and no penitent knight has returned to wipe away the tears from the cheek of the fair capricieuse, nor will he return

at such an hour. The punishment light on his own head then. She resolved to brave all and go. It is late, but assemblies are late.

This time the bell is rung, and the carriage ordered to the door. She goes in quest of Madame St. Géran.

Fast asleep in her arm-chair, worn out with waiting, is that dear unfailing friend. On the pale and patient face is such an expression of weariness as to amount almost to pain. It smote the thoughtless girl to the heart.

No, that bent form and wrinkled brow should be dragged to no midnight assembly for the poor gratification of still further wounding her guardian's feelings. She thought now she could never forgive herself for wringing and torturing that brave true heart.

Ah! that nap of the good old lady probably saved Lord Castleton's ward years of self upbraiding. In the stillness of the chamber she recalled the past, and candour forbade her to deny that she had been startled, and recently—shocked at the light tone that prevailed among these favoured associates for whom she would alienate the noble heart that had so long and so patiently borne with her wayward follies.

Humbled and abashed she murmured a prayer for his return, to sue to him for pardon, for now she no longer thought of extending it to *him*.

Returning to her own room, after seeing her aged friend into hers, her attention was attracted by a note on a salver.

Few moments of her life had been so brimful of bliss as that in which she seized that mute symbol of faithful love, for she never doubted from whom it came.

Half blinded by her welling tears; she could not at first decipher a single line of its contents, but her conscious heart interpreted them.

It was indeed the tender guardian, the devoted lover, that addressed her rather as if he, not she, were the offending party. His note ran thus:—

“As I am convinced my precious one has already forgiven me the pain it was such exquisite torture to me to inflict, I will only implore of her goodness to be permitted to see her to-morrow morning before her round of daily visitors can break in upon us.

“Quite happy I cannot be till her sweet forgiving lips shall pronounce my pardon.

“God in heaven bless and preserve in her unsullied purity my own betrothed !

“CASTLETON.”

After some time spent in earnest prayer, and long and blissful reverie over these brief but

tender lines, Adèle was summoned, but the bell was answered by a stranger. If Florence had been less absorbed she had not failed to remark the unaccustomed absence of her young waiting-maid.

On inquiry it appeared that throughout the day the poor girl had complained of headache and giddiness, and that immediately on completing her lady's evening toilet she had been prevailed upon to go to bed, "And I thought, madam, as you are so good to us all, you would not care she should be disturbed."

"On no consideration," returned Florence, distressed at this account of her young favourite ; "and I thank you for your kind thoughts of me," she added, with a deep sigh. Somehow, she was so humbled by the sense of her late misconduct, that she felt scarcely deserving of the woman's praise.

"If, madam, you would permit me to attend you in the place of Adèle, I would do my best endeavour to please."

"You are very good,—I am sure you would. Thank you so much, but I will see my poor Adèle first."

"Please you, no, madam, pray ! All the servants think there's no manner of doubt, if it ain't the fever she's down with, it must be the small-pox."

"Fever! small-pox! I am indeed grieved.
I will see her at once."

The woman looked aghast.

"Who is with her?"

"No one, my lady, in course; the small-pox
is that terrible——"

"Yes, yes. Has any medical aid been called
in?"

"Yes—no, my lady; leastways, nobody has
come."

Florence hastened to Adèle's room adjoining
her own dressing-room.

"And what is it, my poor Adèle?" said she,
bending affectionately over her, and taking her
burning hand in her own.

The young girl lifted her heavy eyes as she
recognized a voice so dear to her, and smiled,
but the effort of speaking seemed beyond
her.

Sending for the nearest physician, Florence
at once installed herself nurse to the sick cham-
ber; the only nurse, it soon appeared, for terror
seemed to have run away with the senses of
nearly all the household.

"Harris and me won't mind stopping if it
ain't small-pox," said the young woman, stand-
ing very close to the door, which she took care
to keep open; "but she wouldn't come a-nigh
her for the Ingies if it was, for she's not mar-

ried, my lady, nor engaged, ain't Harris, so it wouldn't be fair ; leastways, it would be very hard to be marked."

Eagerly had the dismayed Florence applied her finger to her lip to impose silence ; in vain —the sick girl had heard all, and too painfully impressed with a conviction of the truth of what she had heard, made an effort to raise herself, while, with the most touching earnestness, she implored her beloved mistress instantly to leave her.

Florence shook her head and smiled ; then kneeling by the bedside, and pressing her lips upon the burning cheek of the sufferer, she bade her listen to her.

"Now tell me, Adèle ; nay, dear girl, it is too late now to shrink from me," and again she kissed her on cheek, lip, and brow, as if to convince her of this. "Tell me, if I were ill—dying, perhaps—and it might be deserted by all else, would you leave me to perish ?"

Adèle raised her swimming eyes. "I would perish myself first, dearest lady."

"Even so, my poor Adèle, my dear foster-sister, will I do by you ; but you are not going to die. With God's help I mean to nurse you back to life and health. There, not a word ; one essential of the sick-room is quiet, I know ; another cheerfulness, so I will not have you

droop. Ah, here is Dr. Carleton ! Dear Adèle, be hopeful."

No, it was not that most fearful of disorders, small-pox, so only half the household took to flight. It proved to be scarlet fever, and of a somewhat malignant character.

Of course Dr. Carleton represented to the mistress of the mansion the imminence of the danger she incurred, and of course she repudiated the notion. "It is too late," she returned ; "I have already been some time here."

"No, madam, it may not be too late. Inflection is not often communicated in the early stage of this disorder. I will not answer for your life if you remain."

"I will not answer for it if I run away, doctor;" and so, wilful alike in good and ill, Florence did remain.

The most refractory party to deal with had been Mamma St. Géran, but Florence anticipated her entreaty to stay by an earnest appeal to her affection. She wrote, conjuring her by the love she had always borne her, not to add to her distress by staying to brave a danger she only feared for her, "For you know, my pet," she went on, "there is nothing to apprehend for me, I am fever proof; how often have you yourself said so?" Her most powerful argument was reserved to the last, and was strangely incon-

sistent with the declaration of the moment before. "Think, dear darling mamma, if it should please Heaven to afflict me with the same malady as our poor Adèle, and you, having taken the infection, were the tenant of a sick-room too—think how I should miss my tender nurse from my side. Who would smooth my pillow as you would do? who would watch and pray for my recovery with half the zeal that you would show? None, none, believe me. I might die, and without the consolation of breathing my last sigh upon the dear bosom that has been my shelter from infancy. Oh, then, for my sake (you are too unselfish for me to ask it for your own) yield to my prayer, and fly the danger your stay were now powerless to avert, for I have spent the night by Adèle's side. Once again remember that I carry about me a talisman against this malady, in the fixed conviction that I am infection-proof."

And the good old lady did yield to that last argument, but it may be questioned whether it was not a cruel kindness after all, that banishment. Old age is seldom vulnerable to bodily ailments of an infectious character, and you may almost as well be sick of a fever at home, as carry an aching heart about with you abroad.

There was one, however, whom no argument could banish from the banned house. In vain

were the tenderest of billets-doux penned forbidding him the entrée. Morning, noon, and night Castleton was there, in the very next chamber to the invalid's.

His prayers to be allowed to see his ward were, nevertheless, unavailing; dread of peril to him prevailed over her ardent longing to pour out her deep contrition for her late rebellion upon his bosom; but what entreaty failed to effect, stratagem at last accomplished, for the young lady had certainly overrated her guardian's notions of delicacy when she took it into her sage little head that, pending Mamma St. Géran's absence, his visits would be suspended. Delicacy, in its most refined sense, he was little likely to disregard in *her* case, but he was the last man to stand upon mere punctilio when danger, too, was busy with the loved one.

It was Florence's custom once or twice a day to throw open the door of Adèle's room for the admission of fresh air, and Lord Castleton becoming aware of this, took his stand pretty near the door—he had already treacherously suborned the hospital nurse in attendance with Florence—and so one morning the inexorable girl very unexpectedly found herself folded to his bosom in a close embrace.

In vain she besought him to leave her, declaring she should die if he did not; his only

answer was to assure her he "should die if he did," and to accompany her back to the infected room, where purposely leaning over Adèle's couch, to show how fruitless were all further remonstrance, he continued his gaze of mournful tenderness on the pale and anxious face of his betrothed.

With clasped hands and imploring eyes she returned his gaze. No, it was altogether vain.

He crossed to the side of the invalid, laid his hand upon her hot brow, and holding her hand within his own counted its rapid pulsations.

"I—I did not think you could be so cruel, Stratford."

"And could my darling think so meanly of the man honoured with her love as to conceive he would fly the danger she has voluntarily rushed into? There, there, no ill will arise to me—pray Heaven my love escape as certainly. Adèle will recover," he continued in English, for restrained by the presence of the nurse he had addressed Florence in French. "I have seen something of fever abroad, and I have not a shadow of doubt of her recovery."

"Nor I, my lord," subjoined the nurse. "I have in my experience seen worse cases by far get through it."

And, as was predicted, Adèle did recover; nursed with such untiring zeal by the gentle

mistress who was herself spared the infliction. And Florence, grateful to Heaven for its mercy and inwardly satisfied with herself, was once more the happy, buoyant spirit of old.

And when she emerged from the sick-room, who but Stratford and the dear "purblind old lady" were beside her with looks of faithful and adoring love.

Yes, there was one other who had been constant alike in visits and inquiries—Lady Constance Greville.

One day Florence, who during her seclusion had often thought of the uneasiness her friends must be suffering on her account, asked to see her visiting list. She could not meet them just yet; it would scarcely be safe, but she might write and relieve their apprehensions.

The visiting list was brought, together with the ivory and gold card-box.

"Have a care," said her smiling guardian, "the weight will certainly crush those tiny feet if it chance to fall;" and he scattered the cards on her lap.

One—Countess Ellerslie, a kind little message in the corner. Two—Countess Ellerslie. Three—Countess Ellerslie, and so on till they reached at least a dozen. One, two, three—Mrs. and Miss Beringford; perhaps half a score more, all intimates of the Castleton or Beringford families,

except Lady Graham, who had been foremost in inquiries, and in offers of assistance ; the last in no degree insincere, timidity was not among her ladyship's failings.

"Finis!" exclaimed his lordship, throwing down the last card.

None, not one, from her hundred dear friends who had so worshipped her.

Florence hid her flushed face on Castleton's shoulder.

"Forgive me ! O Stratford, forgive me ! Henceforth my friends shall be your friends."

It was even so—her friends, unlike herself, were not infection-proof. The thin-skinned friendship of the Honourable Mrs. Seymour was vulnerable to the poison of disease ; for rumour, acting like the pendulum of a clock that sways from side to side, now proclaimed it the one, now the other disorder. "Sauve qui peut" might have been in the lady's mind as she turned out of Eaton Place at the speed of an express train.

All honour be paid to the discretion of Mrs. Seymour ! but will her dupe ever again dream of undying friendship, life-sacrifice, &c., &c.? Oh yes ! again, and yet again ! The young and innocent heart will be wounded many and many a time before it will abandon its trust in human goodness. But for a while at least she was safe;

her confidence had been too rudely shaken for her mind to recover its just balance all at once. If the lesson was harsh let us hope it was a salutary one.

CHAPTER XXV.

Passing
From sunshine to the sunless land.

AND the fresh, bracing air of Twickenham, to which place our little party removed so soon as removal was safe, soon brought back strength to the invalid, and bloom to the cheek of her young, loving nurse.

A visit to the Countess of Ellerslie (duration of said visit altogether indefinite) was to follow a fortnight's stay at the villa.

A fortnight! And who may predict what a fortnight's span, brief though it be, may bring forth?

Having, with less difficulty than was apprehended, shaken off the trammels of her ci-devant friends, with what sanguine hopes was the now happy Florence looking forward to her visit to Ellerslie House; with what grateful aspirations Lord Castleton.

Lady Ellerslie would so fondly love his darling,

she would so warmly reciprocate that love, would so cling to, and look up to her. There would be no separation, none to speak of between these two, till his marriage; of that he was sure—quite sure.

Be sure of nothing, O man! but of the wisdom of Almighty rule.

Before that fortnight expired, the hopes and aspirations of Lord Castleton were scattered to the winds. The venerable Countess Ellerslie was laid in the vaults of her ancestors. Sic transit gloria mundi.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A man marked out for highest trust.

A CLOUD—a light and fleecy cloud—at first, but gathering strength in its onward course, was floating over Lord Castleton's political horizon.

The death of her Majesty's envoy at the Russian Court had thrown the ministry into considerable embarrassment, already involved in perplexity on more than one point at issue between the two nations.

How efficiently to supply the place of the deceased minister became a question of no light import.

Under almost any circumstances than those in which he was at present placed, Lord Castleton had been foremost in his country's emergency to proffer his services, but now he shrunk with a kind of alarm from anything which threatened separation from his ward.

An embassy to a foreign court, so remote too as Russia, could only be regarded in the light of a calamity.

True, no distinct overtures on the subject had as yet been made to him, but enough had been hinted to awaken just apprehensions that something more tangible was meditated.

That more than one in the ministry had him in their mind, as pre-eminently qualified for the trust, was certain. The acuteness of his judgment in matters of foreign policy had acquired him an almost national popularity, while to this was added an unblemished reputation, and, oh, rare gift ! a fervid, even an impassioned eloquence arising out of an earnest enthusiasm of character. All these advantages marked him out as *the man* for *the post*; could it be doubted on whom the mantle would fall ?

Thus, while Castleton, ignorant of the strong bias in his own favour, was conscientiously seeking among his political brethren the most eligible party for the appointment, his political brethren had pretty well settled the matter among them-

selves, and as a single spark will fire a train of gunpowder, so one brief sentence, carelessly spoken by a member as he returned with Castleton from the House, sufficed to raise a hurricane within his breast.

They separated immediately, but those few words haunted him; do what he would, go where he would, sleeping or waking, they rose like a sable pall between him and his happiness.

True, it was at his lordship's option to accept or decline any proposal that might hereafter be submitted to him; but a refusal to serve his country in her hour of need, had in it, to the high-souled noble, something that savoured strangely of cowardice. It was like playing at soldiers; displaying your epaulettes at a review, or ringing your spurs through the pavements of St. James', but declining to fight the enemy across the seas.

Often at this juncture were the words of Lord Lytton recalled to mind, never without an ennobling influence: "The man who has health and education can find no excuse for supineness or indifference to that form of legislation by which his country decays or prospers."

As Lord Castleton entered the elegant boudoir of his ward, where now, far oftener than in the gilded drawing-room, he and she with their dear old friend sat, he was startled, painfully startled,

by hearing her sing, not alone with exquisite feeling, but with what, to his morbid fancy, seemed a mournful significance, the beautiful but touching air "Se m' abbandoni."

Ashamed of his weakness, he turned away with a suffocating sense of oppression at his heart.

Notwithstanding the pathos of her song, Florence was in her gayest mood, and she showered down all the witchery of her smiles on her guardian. But to-night a chord had been struck that gave back a strain of most discordant music.

"What, moody, Stratford ! shall I tune my harp to a merrier lay ?" asked the laughing girl.

"No, dearest—the melody of the spheres would fail to cheer me to-night, I believe."

"Nay, then, you are in earnest. What is it ? what has saddened you ? Have I done aught to pain, to distress you ? Ah, yes, some fresh follies, perhaps ; their name is 'legion.' "

"And can my precious one ever do aught that is not 'wisest, discreetest, best ?'"

How arch was the smile on those rosy lips.
"False, flattering, perjured knight ! when you know that I never did a wise or discreet thing in all my whole life. And yet, and yet—I sometimes think you love your foolish, erring

Florence in spite of all, Stratford ;” and she nestled closer to his side.

“ Ay do I, my darling ; perhaps the more dearly that she so sorely needs the strong arm of protection I may so ineffectually extend to her.”

“ Ineffectually ! as how ? what stronger, dearer protection can be mine ?” and her fair face was laid caressingly on his arm.

“ Even that, my love, which only a husband’s right may provide. Oh !” he burst forth in an anguished tone, “ that I dared plead for the possession of this dear hand, now—in this hour.”

“ Stratford ! dear Stratford ! you are not yourself to-night ; what is your dread ?”

“ The worst fiend of all—separation !”

The murder was out ! the fiend had shaped itself into that one mournful word, the word that has knelled the happiness of thousands.

Gaspingly, Florence echoed it. “ Separation !”

It was too late to recall it, yet he tried to soften its effects. “ I am a brute to alarm you thus. It is but a shadow that has scared me out of all common reason.”

“ No, Stratford, you would never have had the cruelty to speak that word if—if—ah yes, you are deceiving me !”

“ No, dear one, I would not deceive you if I could, and could not if I would ; again I say I

have no solid grounds for this apprehension. ‘Sparta hath many a worthier son than I,’ but were I called hence, were I appointed to this embassy”—he paused ;—the ashen cheek of the poor girl warned him to desist. She could bear no more for that night. The shaft was quivering in her heart, and might not be dislodged. She saw it all, and felt there was no hope. Nor was there. “Oh the mercilesss irony of circumstance !” exclaims Wilkie Collins, “the terrible caprice of chance !” That he, her guardian, of all men, should have been marked out for this far-off duty.

Two evenings later, they were again seated side by side, the guardian and his ward. Mamma St. Géran, her knitting needles ominously pointed at her breast, slept the tranquil sleep of age, in her dormeuse—slept in blissful unconsciousness of her darling’s suffering.

More than one hour’s unbroken silence. At last, Castleton rose.

“So soon, Stratford, must you go ? Ah, happiness is very evanescent !”

“Very ; for it vanishes with your presence ; another half-hour I will steal, but time is no longer at my own disposal. I am the sworn servant of another mistress than my Florence now. Ah, my love, had I but called you by the sacred name of wife, I had been content to jour-

ney to this distant land, leaving you here, alone, if that were necessary. I had taxed my fortitude to the utmost, to subdue the mere agony which separation from a beloved object involves. All feeling fades into insignificance before the blissful conviction of safety to the loved one ; you had then heard no murmur from my lips."

"But," returned Florence, timidly, "would it be less painful—the parting with a wife?"

"Yes, twice over yes ; such a halo of sanctity hovers round the presence of the chaste wife ; so binding, so solemn is the institution of marriage, that not the most daring libertine would venture to profane it by one unhallowed breath."

"But though unwedded," she softly murmured, "you cannot doubt me, Stratford."

"Doubt you ! Ask if I doubt the holy angels. No, God knows I do not. Enough ; I may not speak my fears. Oh that Lady Ellerslie had lived ! To her I had consigned you, and smiled as I pressed the parting kiss on those dear lips. Malgrove, too, away, worst ill of all ! Banished at the dictum of a heartless woman, whose praise is yet hymned by every tongue. Oh miserable cant of a senseless world, that can clothe the ice-bound breast in the vestments of mercy ! Why, what is woman unsanctified by pitying tenderness ?"

Florence struggled against her own weight of

woe, trying to soothe her guardian into calmness, and, turning him from the contemplation of Constance's obduracy, bade him remember how unclouded had hitherto been their own sky.

"Still, my best love," he rejoined, "the husband's privilege, to be for ever near you, is denied me. Oh the weary, weary while before I can fold my precious one to my bosom as mine in very truth; my own wedded wife! Do you know that I believe, confidently believe, that the violation of that one fatal clause in your most dear and lamented father's will, wherein he enjoins the delay of our nuptials, were less a wrong than a virtue, a positive virtue. Had he ever contemplated a separation between us, that injunction had never been given."

"Hush! O Stratford, hush!"

"Nay, dear one, you are shocked, naturally so, perhaps, because reflection has not come in aid of argument. Hear me before you decide to dismiss my prayer, for if from my inmost soul I did not believe that he would smile upon our union, no earthly consideration would tempt me to this urgency. Ah, my beloved, can you not trust me?"

But for the first time she shrank from him, conjuring him to spare her.

For some minutes Castleton remained silent,

then kneeling before her, took both her hands beseechingly in his. "Would that I could prevail with my darling to throw all the weight of her reason in this argument before she determines upon a point involving honour and happiness on the one hand, suspense and consequent torture on the other. Oh my soul's life ! why, why will you not trust me ?"

"I do, I do, Stratford ! yet, what can I say ? Can I fly in the face of a father's solemn prohibition, his written injunction ? Be generous, Stratford ; in such an hour probe not my heart's weakness. Urge not that which, in your cooler moments, you would be the first to denounce."

He shook his head. "No, Florence, this is no passionate or selfish impulse, but the deliberate conviction of long thought. I have brought to bear upon the point the subtlest reasoning that the most severe and scrupulous honour could dictate. This night's prayer is the result. But I will not further importune my sweet ward—alas, my ward only !"

And though sorely saddened, Castleton did forbear further importunity. Reverence for the filial love that was content to sacrifice to it the peace of both, silenced him.

But Florence wept through the long night over her fancied harshness, and yet, recalling amidst her tears the very words of the prohibi-

tion, she felt that to have yielded had been to be foresworn, though no promise of obedience had been exacted.

" Yet the time," she softly murmured, " will not drag along the less wearily that he will no longer be here to beguile it of its tedium. Thousands and thousands of miles away, and for thousands and thousands of years, for I shall count time by my tears. Ah, how shall I endure it !"

CHAPTER XXVII.

Oh ! too convincing—dangerously dear—
In woman's eye the unanswerable tear !
That weapon of her weakness she can wield,
To save, subdue—at once her spear and shield.

BYRON.

YES, doubt and suspense have indeed passed into certainty. Her Majesty's congé d'écrire is issued, and the Right Honourable the Earl of Castleton is appointed to the embassy at the Court of St. Petersburgh—a special embassy. He is to depart in ten days.

When it came to the point (one of honour *he* deemed it), Lord Castleton could not play the recreant. He had pledged himself to the best interests of his country, and when the way in

which he could most effectually acquit himself of that pledge lay clear before him, he had called it foul shame to have turned out of the road because it chanced to be rough and thorny. It was not in the blood of the Castletons to serve their country coldly; or by halves.

That not a few among his august colleagues, jealous of his rising fame, rejoiced to be rid of so powerful a rival, admitted of no question; but the majority deplored the loss of an able and upright statesman, while none doubted his being the right man in the right place, for though appointed to no official post out of the country, he was known and respected abroad as well as at home. His lordship had, indeed, formerly been some months resident at St. Petersburgh, and had been on terms of fellowship with more than one of the leading ministry there, no trivial advantage this last in a country so remote from the fatherland, and numbering among its magnates so many of a jealous and suspicious temper.

Now the worst was known, Florence would very fain have taxed her little all of fortitude for the sake of one dearer than herself. But, alas! the knowledge of that "worst" had deprived her even of that "little all."

Who says that the agony of suspense is worse than the worst certainty? Oh! surely they err.

The first may torture, but the second too often destroys. Her guardian, too, seemed powerless to shake off the depression that had seized its hold of him from the moment that a separation between them became inevitable.

He never again recurred to their marriage with a view to an anticipation of the time fixed for its celebration.

It was plain that Florence had been shocked at the bare idea of counteracting the wish of her father. If it were a weakness, it was at least an amiable one, and it was a kind of sacrifice to disturb that feeling ; and yet each hour but served to render him more alive to the dangers to which so young and inexperienced a girl was exposed, alone in that vast Vanity Fair yclept the world. His sole stay was now the Lady Graham. To her he went ; and as never did man more ardently covet for the future wife of his bosom the protecting care and tenderness of woman, so never did man bend in lowlier supplication to obtain it.

Yes, on bent knee, with sad and solemn earnestness, Lord Castleton besought her ladyship to watch over his orphan ward even as she would over her own child till he should return to claim her as his wife.

Ah ! Lord Castleton, had you but divined how much that passionate outburst of love deepened

this woman's hate of the unhappy girl in whose behalf you sued, you had immured her within the gloomiest walls to be found in all England ere thrown her upon such protection !

The bleating lamb as well might look for mercy from the uplifted knife of the butcher, as the betrothed of the Earl of Castleton hope to find it in Lady Graham.

Kneeling thus before her, in the prime of manhood, in the splendour of his unequalled form, the most distinguished noble of the day, Lady Graham drank in large draughts of love and admiration. The most eloquent eyes in the world were upraised to hers, the most insinuating voice vibrated on her ear ; her hands folded within his were pressed to his lips and to his bosom—that wildly-beating bosom ! whose very pulsations she might distinctly count beneath her slender fingers. She knew these were but tokens of his passionate idolatry of another, but she made no effort to resist their influence over her own feelings.

In that brief span of time in which he bent before her, what dark thoughts careered through her brain to blast his peace whom yet she loved—loved not the less wildly perhaps that she loved with so unholly a love ; for love given unsought, involving too the happiness of another,

is unholy, let the unprincipled qualify it by what term they may.

Not long after this interview did her ladyship delay the mapping out of her plan of operation. If her heart were torpid, the activity of her brain had defied competition with the most quick-witted and astute of her sex.

Her aim was ultimately to ruin his ward in Lord Castleton's esteem, and nothing could half so well have promoted the object as this foreign appointment ; invested too, as she might now consider herself to be, with her guardianship during his absence.

At home Lord Castleton's tender vigilance had defied her subtlest efforts to sow the seeds of dissension between them ; this she had proved. If, marching straight to her purpose (for she was no fool, and well knew that hint and innuendo would nothing avail with his lordship), she deplored some indiscretion, some thoughtless folly on the part of the imprudent girl, the tears of repentance that were shed upon his bosom soon dissipated his gloom. The gentle dependence with which Florence hung upon her guardian only the more closely bound him to her. To arouse her pride, and induce her to throw off this dependence, had at one time been her scheme, but then Florence had so little pride to work

upon, and where *he* was concerned gratitude and love swallowed up even that little.

To aim at weakening his influence over her by any attack either upon his loyalty or his love had been equally futile. The quarry was too noble.

One manœuvre of her ladyship's obtained a faint, but very transient success. Strong in her affection for her guardian, Florence had even anticipated her ladyship's counsel to her to endeavour to suppress her grief in his presence, that he might not, she urged, be yet further tried and enervated by it.

"From my knowledge of Lord Castleton," argued the wily lady, "I should say that he had a kind of contempt for infirmity of character in our sex."

Without appearing to note the rising blush on the tell-tale cheek of the shrinking girl, and the little convulsive quiver of the lip, she went on—pitilessly went on.

"I suspect that the whole battery of pathetics, from sighs and tears down to the insinuating swoon, are distasteful to him. What man of sense but must be bored by fits and faintings, with the interesting accompaniments of eau de Cologne, sal volatile, &c., &c. It is a strange delusion under which these bread-and-butter girls labour; the belief that such weapons wing their

way to the breasts of aught but fools. You agree with me, I am sure."

A sickly smile replied to this crucifying irony.

"I confess, when I contemplate the peculiar structure of Lord Castleton's mind, I am reminded of the somewhat stoic hero Philip von Artevelde, and his too gushing lady-love, who, sleeping or waking, was ever at his side, while

"His desire
Was for a less-consuming fire."

Her victim writhed beneath the dissecting-knife that was literally cutting into the quivering flesh.

By such or similar objurgations on woman's weakness, she sought to alarm the sensitive delicacy of the woe-stricken girl and lead her into a show of indifference towards her guardian. But nature was too potent for the poor deceit—a feeble essay—and it fell at once before the might of a love on his part made almost holy by its depth and tenderness, augmented, if that were possible, by his anguish at the approaching separation. In truth he saw not the feint, his soul was full to overflowing with its solicitude for her.

Thus, after the one bootless attempt, alto-

gether oblivious of the counsel of Lady Graham, as indeed of her very existence, Florence even redoubled her tenderness as she noted the degree of comfort it imparted ; and was alternately a smiling Hebe, or a tearful Niobe, as nature and feeling dictated. And the "man of sense" seemed no way weary of the pretty artillery of sighs, and smiles, and tears ; and right well knew the clever tactician who had discountenanced their exhibition, that the frank, manly nature of Lord Castleton was precisely the one to love the more abundantly for abundant love yielded to him, and like most men of his cast, that is, of a high order of soul and intellect, was more likely to be subdued by the gentle and clinging than the strong and self-sustained. Somehow, men do not quite like to be schooled into fortitude by the weaker vessel. So that engine of persecution was worked by her ladyship to no purpose.

"Six months—six weary months," sighed Florence.

"Ay, six weary months, my poor deserted one."

"But not a day, not an hour longer, Stratford?"

And it seemed as if the wistful tenderness of those imploring eyes could never pass from his memory.

Absorbed in the contemplation, he did not immediately reply.

"Stratford, why do you not answer me?"

"What would my dear one? Is it that she would have me stay?"

"She scarce knows what she would or what she would not, I believe," she returned, a faint smile struggling through suppressed tears. "No; since honour calls you hence, I would not that you stayed, yet I want the courage to bid you go. No, I would not fetter you in such soft bondage as love may weave around you, yet I could weep my heart out at the thought of your departure."

"My own! my darling! it is now too late. 'Noblesse oblige.' After all, it is but for a brief span."

"No time is brief, though it were but a day's span, that severs hearts that love, Stratford. Ah, yes; I know, too well I know, I am weak and cowardly; did I ever boast of my fortitude? Why, I have read of maidens who themselves have buckled on the armour of their lords, and bade them forth to the mêlée, to conquer or to die; but for me, I could die myself sooner. And yet—oh, never think I would have you a loiterer in a bed of roses, when honour and renown call you hence."

In spite of himself Castleton smiled.

"Honour and renown!—To conquer or to die!" High-sounding words; my darling's thoughts are swift-winged arrows indeed, far outshooting the mark. Instead of arming for the battle-field, my prowess will at most extend but to the quieting a civil, not a military force. Alas for the days of chivalry! no belted warrior, no red-cross knight bound for Palestine, kneels at your feet for the embroidered scarf, the talisman that is to guard him from the foe-man's spear. It is not given me 'to conquer or to die' in my country's cause," and again he smiled, but to-night her cup of woe was over-charged, and Florence did not give back smile for smile.

Well, it was a very hollow thing that smile of his own, put on to beguile her into momentary forgetfulness of her grief. It was a heavy heart that beat beneath Castleton's bosom as the door closed upon him on leaving Eaton Place that night, almost the last of his stay in England.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

NOTWITHSTANDING the brief time allotted to Lord Castleton before his departure, he contrived to pay a hurried visit to his favourite Oatlands—a twofold motive prompted this visit. He could not, however sore with her on his friend's account, leave the country without one poor farewell to the companion of his youth, but in spite of his better reason that parting was not what it should have been. It lacked the breathing warmth that marked their earlier intercourse, and Constance felt it in the depths of a heart that still, alas! beat too tenderly for him.

She spoke of Florence—and the instantaneous kindling of the eye and quiver of the lip told how passionate was the love that warmed that heart so cold to her. Soul was no longer wanting.

"If my poor deserted darling need advice or solace, will Lady Constance give her these?"

"Lady Constance" (and she emphasized the Lady Constance) "will do all that lies in her power."

"Constance, dear Constance ! forgive me—I am unjust."

"More than unjust ;—cruel !" she replied.

"Not so ; but again I say forgive me, I am harassed by many cares. Herbert's breaking heart—my poor girl's peculiar position—the centre of a circle, yet so utterly, so strangely alone. Were that dear friend in England I had left her without a pang. At a word he would I know return, but I dare not speak that word. There lives but one that can, or ought, to recall him, *she* will not do it, and all must pay the penalty of her obduracy."

"Unjust, ungenerous, Stratford."

He was unjust—to her—though so loyal to Herbert ; perhaps he felt he was, but before he could again plead for pardon young Edward Malgrove came rushing across the lawn, and was fondly clasped in his arms. On this child, as a part of him, he delighted to lavish the love that warmed his heart for Herbert.

No ; that greeting and that parting should have been different between friends once so affectionately linked together, and yet the look that accompanied the last whispered words of Castleton to her—"Dear Constance, be pitiful, be merciful !" had in it so marvellous a softness, that she dwelt upon it with feelings somewhat

perilous to her stern resolve to banish him for ever from her thoughts.

As has been intimated, a twofold motive prompted Castleton's visit to Oatlands. One arose out of a sense of duty to his tenantry, quickened by an ardent desire to do all and everything that he knew must satisfy Herbert Malgrove.

And all that an enlarged and liberal spirit could dictate was done. How boundless is the influence of a great and good man on the minds of his fellows !

Over the proud yet passionate nature of Castleton its exercise was little less than divine. "There is the stamp of a higher nobility than comes of earth in that man's soul," had he said to his ward, speaking of Herbert. "Before the heaven of intellect, and the type of almost perfect goodness, true God-gifts ! I hold it no idolatry to bow, as to the throne of the Eternal."

Again and again did his lordship reiterate his charge to his land-steward, and the workers under him, to carry out the improvements projected by that noblest of beings ; again and again charge them on their allegiance to lay no burden on any one of the tenants.

"Forgive all arrears of rent, Hazlitt."

"Beg pardon, my lord, but your lordship did

that at Christmas, with a year's rental into the bargain."

"True; then if their crops fail, help them; no man can throw his heart into his labour under the depressing influence of meagre crops; don't stay to be asked for help—honest men don't care to turn mendicants."

And still with his absent friend in his mind, his lordship ordered his horse, and called upon several of the neighbouring farmers, cheering them with hopes of their pastor's speedy restoration to them, in recruited health. Time did not admit of a visit to his estates in the North, but to the respective stewards on each one, similar injunctions to those to Hazlitt were given, and Lord Castleton returned to town with a lighter heart than when he set out.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Could I have pour'd the wealth of richest Croesus in thy lap,
I had been most blessed.

SHERIDAN KNOWLES.

ALL the time that could be abstracted from duties consequent upon his own appointment and hurried departure, Lord Castleton devoted exclusively to the interests of his ward. He racked

his brain to devise fresh schemes for her well-being. Unhappily, he mistook the true means to insure it. He had already surrounded her with every luxury that adoring love might supply ; and now, like the Macedonian conqueror, who wept that there were no more worlds left to subdue, he sighed that he could add nothing to her store. Again and again he besought her not to leave him to a single regret that one ungratified wish remained, and lacking real wants, if Florence could have coined a few, she had certainly done so to have pleased him. Perhaps he was more than content when, with blushing cheek and love-lit eye, she whispered that "all hopes, and prayers, and wishes were merged in one, that one the desire for his return."

His latest act of insanity had been to lodge a sum, a sum to take away one's breath but in the naming, with her banker, "for her whole, sole use and benefit."

If this vast sum had been placed there for her destruction instead of her avowed benefit, it could scarcely have answered its end with a more fatal expedition.

Use it, she could not ;—abuse it, she might.

It never appeared to have entered the great statesman's head that there might be a possible danger in allowing a minor a perfectly uncontrolled and unlimited expenditure.

Oh, the follies and oversights of these men of might !

Lord Castleton could check his own passions with all the stoicism of a Cato ; he was powerless as a little child where his idol was concerned.

CHAPTER XXX.

Farewell !

Oh ! in that word—that fatal word—how'er
We promise, hope, believe—there breathes despair.

BYRON.

A WOMAN's heroism is at best uncertain, impulsive rather than constitutional, but her power of silent endurance nothing may, in some cases, overmaster. Florence, however, had been so little schooled to trials, that this, her separation from her guardian, with the one mournful exception that orphaned her, was the first within her experience ; and few could have honestly complimented her upon the resignation or even patience with which it was borne.

Alone, she would bemoan her fate, wring her hands, and weep oceans of tears, betraying not merely the natural grief of the loving woman, but every phase of the spoiled and wayward child she was. Thus when the day arrived which

was to sever her from her guardian, even the faintest pretence at self-control had been beyond her, but that, exhausted by the wildness of her uncurbed grief during the night, she was literally crushed into calmness.

And Castleton, too, wore a calm exterior. Men cannot weep ; at least they do not ; but tearless woe is not less anguished. “ Still waters run deep.”

Brief words were spoken at this their last parting.

In silence, Stratford folded her to his bosom, which heaved convulsively beneath her downcast face ; in silence, he laid her almost lifeless form upon the couch.

“ Farewell, beloved one ! my own ! my bride ! soon, soon to be my wife ;” and kneeling, he gazed upon her with an expression she never in all her after-life forgot. His parting words were no less eloquent in their solemn earnestness than that gaze of speechless love. “ My honour I leave in your hands—guard it, oh my darling ! as a sacred deposit.” One kiss, one long, long, lingering kiss of those blanched lips—and—he was gone.

Oh truly has it been said “ that in every parting there is an image of death.”

CHAPTER XXXI.

And is he gone?—on sudden solitude
How oft that fearful question will intrude!
'Twas but an instant past—and here he stood!

BYRON.

YES; Lord Castleton is gone;—and “Cassio rules in Cyprus!” Yet the Graham sway is one of cold courtesy rather than of despotism. It had ill answered the end her ladyship had in view to have constituted herself controller-general of Mdlle. de Malcé’s conduct, thereby rendering herself responsible for the countless acts of folly which all who knew that very thoughtless young lady might be morally certain she would commit. She was, nevertheless, desirous of impressing her with the conviction that she was the tried and trusted friend of her guardian, armed with full authority over her, if she thought fit to exercise that authority.

Her ladyship was keen-witted enough to perceive she was feared rather than loved by the young fiancée; she saw, too, that with much of the spirit inherent in gentle blood, Florence de Malcé was cast in so soft a mould that little resistance was likely to be offered to her will, un-

less the cords of domination were very tightly drawn indeed ; and the coercive system was precisely the one she designed to ignore.

Ah, there are modes of inflicting torture that may more cruelly lacerate the human breast than any exercise of the most stringent despotism ; a moral suffering before which bodily pain sinks into very nothingness !

True, Mdlle. de Malcé had, as we have seen from the first, shrunk from her ladyship, but latterly, seeing how much this distaste had pained and even embarrassed her guardian, not knowing on which side to turn, or on whom else to rely for efficient protection for her, she had resolved to conquer the feeling, and had done so if but the faintest breath of kindness had been vouchsafed on the part of her ladyship ; but as she had never pretended to a shadow of liking for the betrothed of Lord Castleton, so she did not affect any now. And this mutual distaste was the more to be deplored, that Florence fore-saw that she must ere long resign herself to a separation from her beloved Mdme. St. Géran, for now she could no longer blind herself to her rapidly-increasing infirmities.

Absorbed by solicitude for his ward, her state had partially escaped Lord Castleton's usually acute observation, and when the startled girl would have called his attention to it, the clever

tactics of her trusty and well-beloved counsellor stepped in, and effectually silenced her.

" You will but add to the distress your guardian already suffers on your account by drawing his attention to the matter, without alleviation to this good lady, whose advancing years rather than any positive malady enfeeble her. It would be cruel to alarm his lordship. Nevertheless, I but advise, I do not presume to dictate."

How gratefully was this counsel adopted ! How warmly was her ladyship thanked for her thoughtful consideration ! All praise be given to its influence, for his lordship departed in the comforting conviction that there was at least one tender bosom to which in the wildest storm his darling might nestle.

The great aim of Lady Graham was to lure her victim once more into the mazes of a gay and fashionable circle ; the gayer and more dissipated, the sooner she might hope to ruin her in her guardian's esteem ; but she had a legion of difficulties wherewith to contend before its accomplishment.

To these ultra gay circles her ladyship was herself a stranger. She had acquired such a reputation for the austerity of her morals, and the cold hauteur of her demeanour, that the poles were not wider asunder than the decorous

circles *she* frequented, and the profligate ones she sought for the innocent girl she affected to befriend.

Time enough, however, to mature her plans, for Florence was yet in all the abandon of woe, and to disturb her in its indulgence by the bare mention of a world she confidently believed she had for ever renounced, were to shock alike her tenderness and her sense of delicacy. Her seclusion from the busy haunts of fashion she regarded as a sacrifice but due to her future husband.

In the height of her love, and perhaps her romance, she inwardly vowed that nothing should tempt her from her hermitage at Twickenham, endeared to her twofold as his gift.

"Here," she exclaimed, glorying in her voluntary exile, "far from the giddy haunts I once delighted in, I may in fancy live over again those happy hours when *he* was by my side, and here, perhaps, in the solitude of these groves, I may better fit myself for communion with a mind so noble."

There was a deal of rhapsody, but nothing of disingenuousness, in all this. In the present high-pitched tone of her mind, she had, if a Romanist, joyfully immured herself within the walls of a convent pending her guardian's return ; in default of such an asylum, her Arcadian home was for the nonce to be converted into one, of

which the “Graham” was constituted the lady superior.

Amidst all the varying elements of a nature essentially faulty, Florence de Malcé was so good and pure at heart, and, though so sadly unreflecting, so easily won to reason or repentance, that there were times when her jealous monitress almost despaired of her turning to wrong ; such wrong as that to which she sought to sink her.

Though so profound a schemer, her ladyship could scarcely be said to enact the rôle of “the hypocrite” with regard to her youthful charge. The undisguised coldness and hauteur of her demeanour could leave her in no doubt in the matter of her indifference, to call it by no harsher name.

The fawning trade, unless it had materially furthered her ends, was not in her ladyship’s way. The sentimental morality of a Joseph Surface, or the cringing tartufferie of a Blifil, had been revolting to her ; perhaps in the profundity of her duplicity, and the unscrupulous daring with which she followed up her schemes, something of the Iago might rather have been traced. At all events, she was no less determined than “mine ancient” to hunt down her victim. Hate was as powerful a lever with her as love ; she scarcely abhorred her rival less than she loved Lord Castleton.

And where, while all this deadly animosity was surging up for her destruction, was the unsuspecting girl herself? Tending the dying bed of her earliest friend. Slower and slower beat the pulse of life within that aged frame. Slower—slower still, and then it stopped. The simple-hearted, the loving, and the true sunk to eternal rest upon the gentle breast of the child of her tenderest affections, and Florence de Malcé was now indeed alone.

CHAPTER XXXII.

La solitude est une belle chose, mais il nous faut quelqu'un à qui on peut dire que c'est une belle chose.—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

THE funeral is over; and Florence, seated at her desk, a mourning envelope before her, has just acquainted her guardian with the calamity that has befallen her.

Lady Graham enters.

"To my guardian," she said, answering her ladyship's glance of inquiry.

The young girl never called his lordship by any dearer or more familiar title to her ladyship, who herself invariably spoke of him under the same, or as Lord Castleton.

"Will not that deep mourning border to your envelope alarm him?"

"Indeed I fear so; but what can I do? Yet I will substitute a plain one. How could I be so thoughtless? Yes, it would certainly shock him; and yet the first line of my letter will equally do so."

"As how, Mdlle. de Malcé?" and the cold, relentless eyes dilated. "You do not surely mean to say that you have actually acquainted his lordship with the fact of Mdme. St. Géran's death?"

"Indeed yes. I could not keep my guardian in ignorance of so important an event."

"Important!" her ladyship almost sneeringly da capoed.

"Important to my happiness, I mean," and the rose-bud lips trembled, and the fair bosom heaved beneath its sable covering.

"I am answered; I did not think Mdlle. de Malcé would have put her own convenience, or happiness, as she is pleased to term it, in competition with her guardian's peace and quiet."

Florence looked amazed. "I fear I do not apprehend your ladyship. May I ask what you would advise?"

"Nothing; I advise nothing; I point out the right and wrong, and leave your wiser judg-

ment to decide between the two. I own I am astonished that you could dream of involving his lordship in additional trouble on your account ; but you were aware of my sentiments on this head before to-day."

" Yet I see not how I can save him this pain, dear madam ; it is so new to me to have any concealments from Strat—from my guardian." Florence spoke in a low, deprecating tone.

" You would infer that I counsel concealment with his lordship, then ?"

" Forgive me," she murmured. " I know, I feel, how good you are, that you would simply spare him anxiety on my account ; yet how—"

" Precisely," interrupted her ladyship. " If Mdme. St. Géran's death be made known to him, he will immediately picture you abandoned to uncontrolled grief, for he is sensible that though this poor lady was of no conceivable profit to you in life, you will none the less unceasingly deplore her death, missing, as of course you must, that indiscreet and foolish indulgence which rather fostered than corrected that excess of sensibility always so dangerous to the possessor."

This to a helpless girl, who not many hours before had stood beside the grave of her earliest and latest friend.

"Spare *her*, Lady Graham, if you blame me," replied the unhappy victim of her spleen.

"Nay, Mdlle. de Malcé"—(her ladyship never addressed her by any other title)—"this is really too absurd! However frantic your dotage of this poor creature, you will hardly deny that her mental incapacity—imbecility, rather—was upon a par with her physical defects."

The young girl drew up her lithe and elegant form, as with equal spirit and dignity she replied to this heartless attack upon the dead. "I recognize no defects, madam, in her who bestowed upon me a mother's fondest love from infancy to the closing hour, and—and—"

But dignity, spirit, all gave way before the relentless gaze that met hers, and she sobbed as if in very truth that gentle heart must burst, must break.

"I would suggest your composing yourself in your own room, Mdlle. de Malcé, or ringing for your maid. I have no skill in ministering to young-lady paroxysms."

And her ladyship was obeyed, but instead of following the sage counsel to "compose herself," Florence no sooner reached her room than she flung herself upon her bed in all the abandon of the wildest, the most insane grief. "Oh, Stratford! come back to me!" she moaned. "Oh,

Mamma St. Géran! come back, come back to your desolate child! I am so very, very wretched!"

How weak was all this—how miserably weak and childish! One, whom she thus apostrophized, was on the high seas, the other, sepulchred; but in the tumult of passionate sorrow reason is rarely in the ascendant, and Florence de Malcé, unschooled in the discipline of life, was alone with her bleeding heart.

Meanwhile her ladyship, secure from intrusion, read every line of the letter to Lord Castleton, lying unsealed on the writing-table.

"I will see this in the flames before I leave to-night; see it thrown there by her own hand, too," she almost hissed; "it shall be her own act, not mine."

And it was no vain boast; that night did see the letter consigned to the flames, a voluntary immolation on the part of the writer, whose mind was worked up to a point of agony by the crowning taunt of the temptress.

"If this intelligence of Mdme. St. Géran's decease is conveyed abroad, and alarm for you brings his lordship back to England, his mission unaccomplished, it will be a pleasant reflection for his future wife that by the selfish indulgence of her weakness, the hitherto untarnished name

of Castleton is a byword of scoff throughout every court in Christendom."

This was an anti-climax, and it did its work most effectually. By thus making this first concealment from her guardian his ward's own act and deed, her ladyship escaped the odium which must have attached to her had she herself kept back the information.

It astonished, though it could scarcely be said to distress, Florence, when, some days after, she learned from Lady Graham that she had no intention of residing with her, or of offering her a home under her own roof.

"As a slenderly dowered widow," said she, "my establishment is proportioned to my means. This I could not, and, in fact, would not, care materially to derange, yet I must necessarily do this if you became an inmate of my house, for with so vast an inheritance as you possess"—(it was a part of her ladyship's policy to insist upon this point)—"it is indispensable that you should be surrounded with every luxury which that may supply. Nothing," and a thousand lightnings shot from her eye, "would so annoy your guardian as the least approach to meanness in the outlay of the future Countess of Castleton. It is due to the illustrious house from which his lordship springs, that her appointments, her entire establishment, in short, should be on an appropriate

scale of magnificence with his own, and, I will add, with his princely spirit. For me, I shall never interfere with your exchequer—to this I most emphatically pledge myself”—(of course she did, that pledge half sealed her victim's doom). “You have the mines of Golconda to draw upon, you know; and that fortune over which your legal guardian exercises no control, should, in common delicacy, be sacred from the meddling interference of any other person.”

Thus, as if generously intent upon carrying out the wishes of her guardian, as well as maintaining the dignity of the Countess of Castleton elect, did the subtle lady tacitly though covertly sanction a luxurious extravagance which, drawing around the spendthrift a swarm of the idle, the mercenary, and the profligate, could not but end in the ultimate embarrassment of her affairs.

Truly was Florence de Malcé alone in the wide world. She is alone who is friendless, and friendless she was, for in far-distant countries were all who had best loved and cherished her; not one to soothe to rest the sobbing sigh, worst ill of all, not one to prompt the wise resolve or check the wayward will.

What marvel her once blithe spirit sickened in such a solitude, what marvel if her determi-

nation "never, never to quit it" grew fainter and fainter, as day by day the darkling clouds closed round, leaving no break in her sky. Oui; il se peut bien que "la solitude est une belle chose, mais assurément il nous faut quelqu'un à qui ou peut dire que c'est une belle chose."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A lovely apparition sent.

WORDSWORTH.

A LIGHT broke in upon her dungeon's gloom ; a gentle voice roused her from the contemplation of a dull sea with a fixed horizon. Ellen Graham, long refused to her prayers, stood one day beside the imprisoned bird.

Oh, the gush of joy that welcomed her ! the sweet silvery laugh that responded to that welcome !

Had Lady Graham stood before her at that moment, clothed in all the majesty of her cold and queenly dignity, Florence had too surely knelt at her feet in pious gratitude for the boon vouchsafed. She had felt so sad, so very, very sad, and now smiling in her face was this bright Hebe.

"Ellen ! oh, Ellen ! I shall die with joy.

Why do you cry, Adèle ? Ah, yes ! you are so glad she is come. My bird ! my pet ! my darling ! But I must run this very minute and write to my Stratford—you know I call him Stratford to you—and tell him you are come to cheer my solitude, it will make him so happy. Adèle, we will lunch in my dressing-room. Shall we go into the grounds, dear one ? I must show you my new hot-house."

No need to follow these two youthful spirits in their wanderings, or pry into their innocent secrets. Enough that they were all in all to each other.

It had been one of Castleton's petitions to Lady Graham, on the eve of departure, that her child should pay a long visit to "his poor deserted girl," as he had called his ward. That her ladyship was far too unscrupulous to have held herself bound by any promise she had felt constrained to make to this appeal is certain, if it had chimed in with her special plans to break it, but it did not do so ; the fulfilment of that promise had now become a measure of policy. She desired nothing so much as the hegira of the heiress from her sylvan retreat, but precipitation would spoil all. Dooming her thus, though still making it appear her own voluntary act, to more than monastic seclusion, it was next to inevitable but that strong distaste must

ensue, sufficient at all events to scare away the pious resolves and the romance of the recluse, and produce a reaction in favour of dissipation. The rest would follow in regular sequence.

The bow, somewhat overstretched of late, must be relaxed. Ellen's companionship, poor simple-witted child! could do nor good, nor harm; but it would save her from herself, and from further repinings to her guardian, which last were likely to prove but dangerous food wherewith to whet the craving appetite of an absent and adoring lover, whose stay she dreaded to think might be determined by the accounts he received of and from his idol.

Now to magnify his lordship's affection for his ward was, it is true, impossible; but Lady Graham erred in her estimate of him when she assumed that anything short of absolute peril to her he loved could induce his return to England before the accomplishment of the trust confided to him.

Among other popular kill-times the two girls had one day amused themselves by looking over the heaps of treasures that constitute the wardrobe of a fashionable young lady. Drawers were ransacked, chests and ottomans ingeniously contrived to enshrine no end of splendours, were thrown into the most picturesque, but no doubt charming disorder.

To Ellen, who had never in her life beheld such marvels in satins, laces, velvets, and embroideries, it seemed like the realization of some Oriental tale, in which Florence figured as the beneficent fairy, and she the Cinderella, transformed into the "most beautiful princess that ever was seen," for the heiress took a girlish delight in arraying her companion in the most delicate morceaux from the show-rooms of that unrivalled artiste, Madame d'Artan; while from an ivory and gold étui, in itself a gem, she selected an exquisite set of pearls, suited to Ellen's extreme youth, praying her acceptance of them; then in place of the remarkably short and very scanty tunic, which so disfigured her, and at which both so merrily laughed, she chose a plain rich silk, in which she dressed her, first, however, playfully bandaging her eyes, charging her on pain of instant transformation into an "ugly duck," or some more obnoxious bird or beast well known in fable, not to peep from under the folds.

When all, even to the magic girdle, was complete, the bandage was removed, and Florence turned her round in front of the cheval glass, asking her if she thought mirror had ever before reflected image so unsightly?

Surveying herself for a few seconds in silent surprise, the sweet girlish face changing from

sad to gay, like a burst of sunshine, hid itself among the clustering curls of her beautiful companion, as in a low, glad voice she murmured, “Why, I do declare, Flory, you have made me look quite pretty.”

Not such, however, was the judgment pronounced upon Ellen by the Lady Graham, when a few days after she returned to her mother’s—arms? no, that soft cradle had never been Ellen’s—to her mother’s home. And yet it might have been thought that not alone a mother’s home, but a mother’s heart, had opened to her child under this new aspect of improved loveliness; that she had joyed in that dawning loveliness, instead of regarding it with a jaundiced eye, as menacing rivalry to her own matured beauty. But apart from this view, despotism was so entirely the inburnt quality of this woman’s nature, that if no prescient dread of rivalry had existed, she had none the less resented, as an infringement of her own prerogative, any change of which she herself had not been the originator.

It was ironically said of Richelieu that “if the sun had incommoded him, he would have extinguished it;” the like might almost, without the irony, have been averred of her ladyship’s will.

After a cold and even scornful scrutiny of her daughter she addressed her :

" You will be pleased, Miss Graham, to charge, and that immediately, your present May-day costume for one more modest and becoming your age."

Now there had been a few (but a few, it is true, for Ellen was still in the school-room) who had ventured upon a grave doubt whether the late costume worn by Miss Graham had, from its curt and scanty proportions, been quite within the limits of strict modesty ; nevertheless they might have laboured under a misconception. Nothing is more capricious than taste in dress.

" Did you understand me, Miss Graham, that you still stand there with that air of senseless bewilderment ? "

Yes, her child had understood but too well ; her tearful eyes betrayed her mortification.

" The 'Graham' must have sunk low indeed when it is thought meet she should robe herself in the cast-off finery of a De Malcé."

" Indeed, dear mamma, this dress was taken quite new from Flory's wardrobe, and we thought, she hoped at least, that you would be pleased to see me look so well," and she blushed as much perhaps from girlish vanity as from dread of her mother's displeasure.

" Silence ! I desire. Ellen, I look upon this interference on the part of this upstart, bragging heiress as little less than an insult to one poor

as yourself. True delicacy had never paraded her generosity. Fine times when a mushroom De Malcé instructs a Graham how to attire herself."

"A mushroom, mamma?"

"A mushroom, Miss Graham! a parvenu! an upstart!"

"Do you know, dear mamma, I don't fancy the De Malcés can be a new family. Flory told me of a Guy de Malcé who fought under the great Condé, at Rocroi."

"Rocroi! Your ancestors, Miss Graham, made mince-meat of her countrymen at Agincourt and Harfleur, but whatever fame her ancestors may have won their descendant is safe to sully;" and her daughter was dismissed.

Poor Ellen! One long last lingering look she cast at the mirror as she entered her dark and meanly-furnished dormitory; then shaking out the scanty folds of her old linsey dress that hung on a peg behind the door, substituted it for the delicate silk now to be cast aside.

The transformation of the beautiful princess into Cinderella the cinder-sifter, as described in that most bewitching of fairy legends, could scarcely have been more startling. Thomson's Lavinia might have been "when unadorned, the most adorned;" but Ellen Graham though very charming was not a poet's ideal, and did not so

well stand the test; nor was she much of a philosopher unless it was of the school of Heraclitus, for at sight of her dusky figure in the glass she burst into tears—tears more bitterly renewed next day when she learned that she had paid her last visit to her generous friend. But vain were all repinings—she returned to her dingy school-room that not even a dog, a bird, or so much as a flower enlivened.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

But when to mischief mortals bend their will,
How soon they find fit instruments of ill.

POPE.

* * * *

I swear me to your service, lady.

LADY GRAHAM was proud of her patrician descent, and if the antiquity of her family had not constituted almost its solitary claim to distinction her ladyship might have been justified in that pride.

Centuries ago, indeed, her ancestors had won some renown for military prowess, stained though it was by a ferocity then regarded as praiseworthy. In later ages the “sons degenerated from their sires,” and inertia at home and

abroad became their characteristic, while the hereditary acres, long languishing of famine, gave up the ghost under the total mismanagement of the last male descendant of the line, Allen M'Naughten, the father of Lady Graham.

But if this gentleman could boast no broad lands for his inheritance, a liberal legacy of pride would seem to have been bequeathed him ; thus he alike declined to soil his hands with dirty trade, or addle his brain with any of the learned professions.

If, with the repudiation of all honest toil, he had likewise eschewed the vices of the day, he might have gone down to the tomb of all the M'Naughtens (so little did the family live in the esteem of their neighbours) with at least the negative merit of having lived a merely harmless life, but the character he had long sustained, “de n'en avoir aucun,” roused unhappily to active ill.

Having deceived the daughter of a respectable farmer, and then deserted her and the infant, the odium he incurred forced him from the country. On his return, some six or seven years after, he set the seal of meanness upon his crimes by marrying a lady of small property, it is true, and living upon that property; and his daughter, the sole issue of this union, but ill-enduring the straitened means to which, as she grew up, she saw herself imperiously doomed, determined

to emancipate herself at the first opportunity. That opportunity soon presented itself—and at little more than seventeen she became the wife of Sir Archibald Graham, a man of family, and of the most liberal spirit, but her senior by a score of years. And now, at little more than thirty, Margaret Graham found herself a slenderly-dowered widow with one child, unfortunately a girl, for the baronetcy and the estates (strictly entailed) passed to a nephew of her deceased husband.

To return, however, to the father of Lady Graham, or rather to his victim, whose family, with truer nobility in their veins than coursed through those of the high-born gentleman, dealt mercifully and even generously by the poor deceived girl ; and when, heart-broken, she sunk to her last rest, they sheltered her worse than orphan child (a girl), whom they placed at school, hoping with the advantage of a good education the better to enable her to make her way through a world that shows scant pity to the child of shame. An early and imprudent marriage, however, frustrated their hopes, and in less than a twelvemonth she was widowed and penniless, with an infant son to support.

It was in this state of destitution that the illegitimate daughter of her own father presented herself before her half-sister, Lady Gra-

ham, then just home from her bridal tour, and in all the éclat of her presentation at St. James's; and it is but simple justice to her ladyship to say, that on full proof of the widow Stewart's claims upon her she attempted no repudiation of them.

Few are altogether bad. Unscrupulous, haughty, and despotic her ladyship confessedly was, and so nearly destitute of feeling as to be at times even cruel; but she had yet a certain instinct of justice, to say nothing of her family pride, which on this occasion stood in good stead of feeling. She had also a withering contempt for particular crimes; her father's came under her category. Libertinism she held in deserved abhorrence, and thus her sense of right operated in behalf of the illicit offspring of that father's crime. Nor love, nor pity, had one atom to do with the helping hand she stretched out to her half-sister; while she despised *him* she pretended to no compassion for *her*; but she recognized at once that she had been basely wronged by their common father, and simple equity demanded that such poor reparation of that wrong as lay within her power should be made, and she resolved to make it.

For Elsie Stewart was provided a situation with more than ordinary advantages, while her child was cared for till the age of fifteen, when

he was placed in a mercantile house of repute in the city ; but the stream that crimsoned the boy's veins was corrupt at the source; and there, to his disgrace, he robbed his employers, and of no inconsiderable sum.

Cold and impassive was Lady Graham by nature, but the ties of blood are ever the last to give way ; the one grain, perhaps the one single grain of feeling that warmed her callous breast was stirred by the despairing wail of the half broken-hearted mother, as she clung to her knees, conjuring her to save her boy from a felon's brand. She did save him. The money was made up, and at a sacrifice, for Lady Graham was not rich ; and instead of crossing the seas, the youth was sent home to his mother, on whose slender resources he lived till he drained them to the last farthing.

Thus was her ladyship again taxed for their joint support. All these were heavy obligations to have incurred, and if Mrs. Stewart's gratitude showed somewhat cold in the face of them, perhaps the emotionless nature she had to deal with, which repelled, rather than encouraged, the expression of all natural warmth of feeling, might be said to be answerable for it. Nevertheless, apart from her devotion for her child, Mrs. Stewart was not a woman to whom vivid feeling or ardent gratitude—or indeed anything

vivid or ardent—could be fairly ascribed ; for him she had love in measureless abundance ; for him she had shrunk from no amount of privation or suffering ; with the rest of the world she had no overflowing sympathy, and the world returned the compliment, it had never evinced any for her ; the small remnant of affection, however, which she could spare from her graceless cub she freely bestowed upon her benefactress, and had rejoiced at an opportunity of doing her faithful service, for the Scotch are faithful, to a proverb.

And the wish was nearer accomplishment than Mrs. Stewart had calculated upon. She received a summons one morning to Brook Street, which she lost no time in answering.

She is closeted with her haughty kinswoman, who, attired in a rich silk damask dressing-gown, was gorgeous and beautiful as a sultana. Mrs. Stewart, in whose less imposing face and figure might nevertheless be traced a strong resemblance to her half-sister, looked, in spite of her mother's lineage and her threadbare gown, every inch a lady, but a lady in "reduced circumstances," a phrase of very ambiguous meaning, by-the-way.

By the fixed attention with which the wearer of the thread-bare garment regards her ladyship, it is evident that no ordinary matter is under

discussion. In fact her ladyship had long cast about in her mind for an agent, on whose aid she might confidently rely for the furtherance of her scheme of winning the hand and fortune of Lord Castleton, for she was acute enough to perceive that single handed its achievement was next to impossible ; alone and unaided she could not hope to succeed in ruining Mdlle. de Malcé in her guardian's esteem, or alone and unaided the attempt had been made, for it was opposed to the pride and reticence of her nature to have two in a secret if one had sufficed.

Throughout her life Lady Graham had never made a confidant ; of that weakness of weak minds, favouritism, she was at least guiltless, but it had become self-evident that she must either abandon her hopes, now become of vital import to her happiness, or seek such means of help as were to be met with, and at once her half-sister occurred to her mind as the one who, under favour of the weight of obligation incurred, was most likely to answer her purpose, and she was accordingly summoned to Brook Street.

In her ladyship's lexicon there was no such word as "fail," and so, after making what is termed "a clean breast of it," she turned to her pauper kinswoman.

"And now, Elsie Stewart, that I, Margaret Graham, called 'proud Margaret Graham,' have

stooped to this humiliation — oh ! no need to shrink back, I do not mean stooped to you ; because I am high and you are low, such paltry pride at least is not mine—but now that this humiliating revelation is made, now that I have bent to tell you that, with all the passionate ardour of my soul, I love this noble, *have loved* him from the hour we met, and that but for the arts of this designing but beautiful doll, a child in years, however matured in artifice, he had been now at my feet, for I had claims if not upon his love at least upon his tenderest friendship, long, long before he beheld this foreign adventuress ; now I say that I have bowed my inmost soul to your inspection, I ask you—I, Margaret Graham, your kinswoman, and I will add your benefactress—if you will aid me to recover this but half-extinguished love ?” Speak, and frankly—ay or no ? Have no dread of my displeasure in case of refusal. If I am too proud to sue, I am also too proud to revenge or even to menace,—but beware of deceiving me by any false promise of fealty. Say, shall I be beholden to you ?” But by this time Mrs. Stewart was at the feet of her ladyship.

“Lady Graham ! you have pitied my child, the only living being except the mother that bore him that ever did do so ;—you have done more, you

have saved him, saved him from a felon's doom, and so help me heaven I will serve you and yours to the death. But, but—I would pray you, oh, Lady Graham, I would pray you, by your own hopes here, and of salvation hereafter, that—”

“Stay, kinswoman—” began her ladyship.

“Nay, madam, hear me out: I would pray you—for my very soul seems dying within me—to lay as light a burden upon that soul as may be, for, God help me, I sometimes think the sin of my father cleaves to me and mine, half redeeming that of my poor misguided boy.”

“This is a superstition which from your clear, solid reason I had not looked to find, but of this anon. Well, I accept your allegiance, and be the Graham motto, ‘Semper fidelis,’ yours; it shall be your gage, and in exchange take mine, that no heavier offence shall weigh down your conscience than that of saving one of the best and noblest in the land from the base arts of a designing coquette, and worse, worse, Elsie, and of restoring to happiness one who will scarcely be ungrateful for the service rendered. Elsie Stewart, I can no more cant than (this object attained) I will recant—I shall then be the debtor. You may believe me, when something contrary to my nature, which has not been cast in the softest mould, I tell you, that except

this great love which consumes me, I hold none in life so dear as yourself."

"And your sweet child," said the woman, kissing the hand artfully extended to her, "your fatherless bairn."

"What, Ellen! Oh, ça s'entend."

It had, nevertheless, been clear to any one less preoccupied than Mrs. Stewart, that the very existence of her child had gone clean out of her ladyship's mind.

"You understand that you reside with this 'fair one with the golden locks,' whose fortune is so vast that if she curled these 'golden locks' with thousand-pound bank-notes her exchequer, could stand the strain upon it, and as I expect she will be only too glad to invest you with its absolute control (for these babies would play at chuck-farthing with their guineas, lacking other pastime), you will be able to advantage yourself; without prejudice to your trust, your own necessities may be safely thrown into the scale." Mrs. Stewart drew back, crimsoning to the brows.

"I thought I understood your ladyship that a fixed salary was attached to this post; I were loath to do a mean or dishonest act."

"And I were the last, methinks, to counsel you to either," returned her ladyship. "If the integrity of Margaret Graham could be open to

question, her pride might have been accepted as guarantee. Nevertheless, as you will ; my meaning was simply this, that no fastidious scruples need deter you from becoming the recipient of this spendthrift's extravagance. As you will be grand chamberlain, secretary, and aide-de-camp, in short all and everything in her household, your post will be no sinecure, and must needs be remunerative. The gold of this scatter-brain is flung pêle-mêle, alike to the undeserving as to the meritorious."

"But," interposed her shocked auditress with true Scotch thrift, "must I venture upon no check to this awful waste of property?"

"It were the very climax of human weakness so much as to dream of it—'a wilful mon maun gang his ain gait ;' nor, understand me, do I seek this girl's reform. It is from out the depths of her folly—on the ruin of her fame—I look to build my own fortune."

These last words were uttered in a low but perfectly distinct voice.

The widow Stewart gasped for breath, while over the dead pallor of her face stole the scarlet flush of shame. Her ladyship's gaze was fixed and searching.

"Elsie Stewart ! you repent already. Now mark me, for it is too late to retrace your steps. I warned you—in spite of that warning, in the

face of heaven, you vowed yourself to my service. I scorn menace, but once for all remember I will not be trifled with. I accepted your pledge of faith, and be you well assured I will exact the fulfilment of that pledge. It is not for you to question or to comment, but to obey." The woman's lips moved, but no audible sound issued from them, and before she had time to recover, her ladyship had passed out of the room.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A lip of lies—a face formed to conceal,
And without feeling, mock at all who feel.

BYRON.

THE communication between England and the North of Europe was less frequent and far more uncertain ten years ago than at the present date. Lord Castleton, nevertheless, wrote to his ward by every mail, wrote cheeringly too, to sustain her fainting courage, and oh, how tenderly !

These letters now constituted the sole solace of the young recluse's dreary life. Too soon, therefore, was the prediction of her ladyship verified, that she would weary of solitude and sigh for a change.

Her desire to return to town was nevertheless

unaccompanied by any urgent solicitation. She had no very definite longing for gay society, her wishes were bounded to the companionship of a single friend, but friends do not fall from the boughs of trees like ripe acorns. The one true heart that had been with her in her hour of sorrow was ignorant of her loss ; it had been an item in her ladyship's policy to keep the announcement of Mdme. St. Géran's death from the public journals. It had otherwise met the eye of Constance.

Prior to Mdlle. de Malcé's return to Eaton Place, however, she was to go through the farce of selecting a lady to reside with her ; this provision, in her capacity of guardian, Lady Graham dared not neglect ; but farce it was, since, as we know, the selection was already made in favour of her trusty ally and kinswoman. But this was, of course, without the knowledge of her whom it mainly concerned, for, omnipotent in duplicity, it was her ladyship's intention to ignore all cognizance of Mrs. Stewart, and to instruct her daughter to do so too. From Florence's suspicions she had nothing to dread—guileless herself, she never doubted others—but there were those who might exercise the right of reason, and take the liberty of hinting that the party that so ill discharged the trust of protectress to an orphan girl, was a creature of my lady's. An

advertisement was therefore to be the medium of the widow's introduction to Florence, who was apprized of this step in her ladyship's usual curt and decisive manner.

"You are aware, Mdlle. de Malcé, that it will be necessary to fill up the situation in your family left vacant by the death of your friend."

"My friend, madam," returned the young girl with spirit, "filled no situation in my family but that of a most dear mother to the only one left of it."

"Beseech you, no pathetics, Mdlle. de Malcé ; my time is too precious to waste on sentiment, for which, as you know, I have no special vocation. For decorum's sake, you must be sensible that some sage person should be provided before you emerge from your present chrysalis state into the full expansion of the butterfly."

To this covert sneer Florence only replied by a bow ; and a day or two after, an advertisement, stipulating for "middle age, refined manners, and superior attainments," brought the usual amount of pretenders to each and all of these requirements.

Among the earliest of these rival candidates was one who, by dint of an extensive shawl, a Puritan cap beneath a poke bonnet, and a veil ingeniously plaited into thick folds, evidently entertained the hope of mystifying you as to the

precise number of years she had outrun her twenty summers ; but even a decimal added to her score of years could scarcely be stretched into middle age ; nor was the date of her birth the only point over which a trifling degree of incertitude might be permitted to hover.

Alas ! even the pretty and genteel figure of Miss Knaggs, with corresponding manners, failed to impress you with any very exalted notion either of the birth or breeding stipulated for. The superior attainments might, nevertheless, be there, though the blood of the Howards were wanting.

"An artist, I believe, I understood your father to be," said her ladyship, who, with Florence beside her, sat in all the majesty of authority, pen in hand, at her desk, prepared to take notes, and to consign them to the flames when taken.

"Yes, ma'am—my lady, I mean—an artist."

"A member of the Academy ?" queried her ladyship.

"Oh ! no, ma'am ; my father don't keep any school."

Her ladyship was far too well bred to stare, but the lustre of her dark eye gleamed ominously on the luckless pretender to "superior attainments."

"Attached, perhaps, to one of the 'Water-colour' Societies ?"

"No, my lady; my father don't belong to any societies except his club, which he is allowed in sickness; and he has been that ill these many months that he was obliged to claim. My father is a painter on glass."

Her ladyship laid down her pen, and bowed with emphatic politeness.

"I believe, Miss Knaggs, it is not necessary to give you any further trouble."

"Oh! no trouble, - my lady; not in the least."

"I mean, Miss Knaggs, that we decline your services, with thanks."

The poor girl rose (for Florence had, after a few seconds, handed her a chair), sat down, rose again.

"I am sure, my lady, I—I—" she spoke hurriedly, excitedly, and turned deprecatingly to the sweet, sympathizing face of the younger lady—"I shall be happy to do anything 'not menial,' miss. I undertake, in addition to English, 'French acquired on the Continent,' music, and drawing"—it was clear she had her own advertisement by rote—"my father has gave us all the best of educations."

"Miss Knaggs, the superiority of your attainments is too apparent for further question, but we must be allowed to decide for ourselves;" and her ladyship bowed her dismissal.

"I can have the best of references, my lady," urged the poor girl, "and I don't wish to stand out for renumeration."

The pressure of a slender finger upon a tiny silver bell was the only reply to this last disinterested assurance.

"You will show this lady out," said her ladyship, on the servant's entrance.

Now, to her so deeply interested in the result of this day's inquiries, a new light had been let in upon her experience, and the scene just enacted was as novel as it was painful, and at the first silvery sound of the bell she had darted from the room.

Pending this cruel, because utterly meaningless, inquisition on the part of her ladyship, Florence had read, or fancied she read, in the faded dress and anxious voice of the young woman, a too probable tale of distress, and, waiting at the head of the stairs for her appearance, she pressed into her hand a bank-note, with the words, "Pray forgive me; I would not wound you for the world," and gained the sitting-room before she had been missed by her ladyship, on whose lip an amused smile was holding faint conflict with a strong sense of disgust.

"The insolence of these underbred people

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pain, and so repugnant to all the better feelings of our nature ? No need to parade the humiliations of the unfortunate—enough, and too much, that they have to endure them !

Of a score of candidates for a single appointment, we know that but one among the number can be elected ; to the nineteen, then, disappointment must inevitably accrue,—yet, of those nineteen, perhaps more than half deserved to succeed, while all, it may be inferred, coveted success, in too many instances, it is to be feared, as a means of downright existence. No matter—they must go empty away !

Ah ! the affluent know little, and perchance care less, for the throes of this thread-bare, pale gentility ; the most harrowing of all species of indigence—this contention of pride with poverty, because the outer surface must be gilded with smiles to hide the deep of woe within. Like the Spartan boy, you must wear a front of unconcern though death be gnawing at your vitals !

Some warm, fresh young hearts there are (some ! there are many) that can be won to compassionate sympathy with poor humanity, and one of such was Florence de Malcé's : that heart, spite of its manifold follies, bled for the suppressed suffering that day witnessed. She had known that the world was choke full of

starved misery ; but, somehow, her sense of its palpable existence was strangely sharpened on this occasion. The artless arts of the first comer were too transparent to deceive the veriest tyro, but they helped her to a reading of much that followed. A world of tender compassion was comprehended in these brief words to Adèle, as she laid her fair head on its pillow of down at night—"that all for pity she could die."

The next day came the widow Stewart, but not the Lady Graham : the pretext for absence—"unforeseen and urgent business," the cause—the determination to leave the whole conduct of this affair to Mdlle. de Malcé, that no blame now or hereafter might attach itself to her.

She well knew that the "widow in reduced circumstances, with an orphan boy to support," would wind her instantaneous way to the soft heart of the heiress ; and her instinct did not deceive her—Mrs. Stewart was at once engaged, subject to the approval of my lady paramount, who, on hearing the particulars, demurred as a matter of course, and at last wound up with a—

" Well, Mdlle. de Malcé, remember you have made your own election ; this person is a total stranger to me."

" Dear madam, she has so much the air of the gentlewoman."

Her ladyship bowed.

"Not an unimportant item, I grant, since this Mrs.—what name did you say?"

"Stewart."

"Stewart—a Scotchwoman I presume—will have to receive, and pay visits with you, yet moral worth must take the precedence; this last point, however, can only be determined by the report of her referee. The most rigid inquiries must be made on this head; if you will write at once, I will take your letter to be posted with one of mine, which, by-the-way, I have left in the carriage."

"But will it not," asked Florence, timidly, "be a little wounding to this poor lady's feelings to make inquiries respecting her character?"

"Wounding to her feelings! Mdlle. de Malcé, who and what is this Mrs. Stukely, or Stewart I believe you called her, that an exception, contrary to all the established rules of protection against imposture, is to be made in her favour? We must be satisfied of her perfect integrity before she crosses this threshold."

And of course they were satisfied of the "perfect integrity" of this faithful ally of "the Graham." In due time an elaborate panegyric reached them, purporting to be written by a lady with whom Mrs. Stewart had resided several years. It is needless to say that no

such person was in existence; but the statement answered the purpose for which it had been manufactured. It confirmed Mdlle. de Malcé's prepossession, and calmed the just apprehensions of her ladyship.

And thus the widow Stewart, installed in her new office of companion to the heiress, became

“The secret enemy whose sleepless eye
Stands sentinel, accuser, judge, and spy.”

CHAPTER XXXVI.

L'une va comme le vent,
L'autre pense auparavant !

VOILÀ LA DIFFÉRENCE !

It had not been forgotten by Lady Constance that at her last interview with Lord Castleton she had promised to see and, if need be, solace his “forsaken” Florence. No sooner, therefore, did the tidings reach her of the death of the kind old lady whom she remembered with something of that tenderness with which motherless girls are wont to regard kind old ladies, than she hastened to town.

Who said that Constance Greville's heart was ice-bound ? who called her proud and obdurate ? Had you seen her, Lord Castleton, bending

over the beloved of your heart with the protecting kindness of a sister, sorely had you repented the harshness of your judgment, eagerly had you sought its reversion.

In her next letter abroad, Florence dwelt with all the warmth of her nature upon her delight in having her with her.

Constance, though much alone with Florence, saw a good deal of Mrs. Stewart, and seeing only a middle-aged, sedate, and very lady-like person, could not but give due praise to Lady Graham for so judicious a choice of a companion to one so new to the world as Florence, and so wholly destitute of near or dear ties.

Of her ladyship herself Constance saw but little ; herein "the Graham" displayed her usual amount of tact. The lady of Beechgrove had a cooler head and a riper judgment than her volatile friend, was three or four years her senior, and had been her own mistress almost from girlhood ; her penetration then might have proved troublesome. The designing are always suspicious—the ingenuous singularly trustful.

But it was worthy of note that during Constance's stay of several weeks, everything connected with the town and country establishments reflected the highest credit upon the triumvirate. It is true that the whole was upon a scale of magnificence that far exceeded the

modest tastes of Constance ; but then she knew the princely spirit of Lord Castleton, and Florence was his destined wife. Then her fortune was reported immense ; and all this allowed for, there was certainly nothing which had warranted interference, nor did anything transpire on which to ground a shadow of suspicion that matters were not going on well.

The brace of widows took good heed that they *should* go on well, pending the visit of the Beechgrove heiress ; while Florence herself, absorbed in tender companionship with her friend, helped unconsciously to blind and mislead that friend's judgment.

It is true that Constance had not been eight and forty hours under the roof before she had ample confirmation of the accuracy of all she had heard from Emily Malgrove of the reckless generosity of the young prodigal.

She saw that she was absolutely without the capacity to negative the most extravagant demands upon her, and that too, arising as much from the softness as the munificence of her disposition. No petition, however wild and romantic, was rejected, no matter by whom preferred. Into the outstretched palm of each and all was poured the contents of her purse. In short, she acted with but slight travestie on the principle of the poet's somewhat questionable morality.

"I know not, I ask not, if guilt's in that heart,
I know that I love thee whatever thou art!"

That she was in instances innumerable the victim of the grossest imposture followed as certainly as thunder upon the electric flash, but conviction brought no cure to her folly; the warning was unheeded, the lesson forgotten so soon as the next wail of woe trembled on her ear.

Ah! if instead of living *sans souci*, she had been forced to live *sans six sous*, what a world of wholesome discipline had been inculcated in the brief space of these fated six months!

Constance cautioned, counselled, chid; and the sweet smiling eyes gazed up into the grave liquid orbs of the gentle Mentor, and vowed submission, but the vow was broken at the first movement of the heart.

And how often had Castleton fondly smiled, ay, full as often as sighed, at her wilfulness and her caprices, embarrassing as they sometimes proved; and smiles, we would submit, do not class among the orthodox specifics for the cure of female perversity.

It is not always the wisest men or the profoundest casuists that are the most readily enthralled by a corresponding gravity of tone. Perhaps a woman never excites so passionate an attachment as when she is tormenting her lover

within the verge of desperation, always assuming that guilt has no part in her wilfulness.

No fear in the case of Florence de Malcé of the flame dying out for lack of fuel, in the shape of incertitude and anxiety, to keep it alive.

In distinct opposition to the policy of Lady Graham, the aim of Constance was to keep Florence within a small and very choice circle of friends, and for this purpose she paid several visits both to her own and Lord Castleton's more immediate acquaintances in company with her, an expedient of all others the best calculated to overthrow the projects of "the Graham."

"You will, my Florence, be at no loss for society when I am gone, if you cultivate the Beringfords. They were among our dearest friends at Oatlands and Beechgrove."

"Oatlands! ah, Constance! what happy days, few in number, but how delightful were those I spent at the Rectory, my dies albus I call them; yet the last time Herbert was ill, and you were away. Dear, dear Herbert! Oh, how Stratford loves him! Constance, how strange it is that you should never have been in love."

Oh! how the pale cheek of that lady flushed, and her lip trembled as with an effort at composure she inquired of her volatile companion, "why she had arrived at this conclusion?"

"Why, because, Constance, if you had, you

would be engaged, you know. It is a marvel how, living almost under the same roof, you could help falling awfully in love with my Stratford ; or next to him, with the best and noblest of created beings."

"Herbert Malgrove, you would say !" But Constance only used Herbert as a stalking-horse to escape the martyrdom of canvassing the merits of another and more tenderly beloved friend, and with those bright eyes so searchingly bent on hers, too.

"Yes, Herbert ; is he not the best and noblest ?"

"Indeed, I do truly think him so."

"And ah, Constance ! how fondly he loves you !"

"I fear he does, Florence."

"Fear so, dearest ! What is *your* fear would be the glory of every other woman."

"Would it be yours, my Florence ?"

"Ah ! but then I love another."

"I love another," echoed Constance, speaking to her own thoughts.

"Yes, I love Stratford, or I could not choose but love Herbert."

"I love Stratford, or I could not choose but love Herbert." Each word of that da-capo was slowly and almost unconsciously syllabled by Constance, and with a strange significance.

Why, Florence was speaking out her own story. She tried to shake off the dreamy lethargy that was creeping over her senses.

"Strange that you could withstand him, Constance!"

"Whom?"

"Herbert Malgrove."

"Florence, I shall never marry."

"There now,—you could never say this if you loved."

"You think not?"

"No, for if you did, how could you so sorely wound him you loved by a rejection?"

"But what if he I loved had never sought my love?"

Florence shook her head. "Constance Greville would never give her love unsought,—she could not love in vain."

"She could not love in vain—you think not?"

"I am sure not. However Stratford could choose poor little scatterbrain me, instead of the pearl of great price I never could divine, and if you had but held out the very tiniest bit of hope, he never had done so, of that I am sure."

"Be sure of nothing in this life, unless it be the vanity of all human love," and Constance smiled; but oh the dreariness of that smile! the lip so arch and playful, the eyes so woful sad; it startled even her unsuspecting companion.

"Constance, dear Constance ! Ah, if I dared speak out."

"Speak out ; 'cut boldly,' was the augur's counsel," and she laughed a little hollow laugh.

"Then after all, perhaps you do love ; and Herbert, dear Herbert is indeed lost !"

"A good man, Florence," she returned, staving off the first suggestion—"and Herbert is both great and good—will never stake that higher hope to which the Christian aspires, against any that may hang upon a woman's fiat. He may mourn the destruction of an earthly hope, but he will not sink beneath the blow."

Constance rose, evidently to end a discussion so embarrassing to one, so painful to both. She proposed a drive to town, to call on the Bering-fords.

"Hope Beringford is such a dear good girl, your own age too, and affianced to an old college friend of your Stratford's ; I want you to be inseparables."

Ah, how fondly, long before the term of her stay expired, had Constance learned to love the betrothed of Lord Castleton, to love her for herself alone ! Apart from her loyeliness, and brilliant accomplishments, she had so many winning qualities ; was so utterly guileless, so beyond all compare unselfish.

To be sure, the lady was constrained to admit

that this was the silver side of the shield ; the reverse showed her extravagant, rash, and volatile ; with so yielding a temper as to approach the confines of weakness.

Such a character needed the firm yet gentle hand of love to direct it, and that firm yet gentle hand was thousands of miles away.

Before the departure of Constance, she seized an opportunity of bespeaking Mrs. Stewart's interest in behalf of her charge. A certain cold formality was all the fault she had to find with this lady, and much she marvelled that one so captivating as Florence had failed to thaw the ice round her heart.

"Do not, I entreat you," said she, "hesitate to write to me in any difficulty or danger that may arise to Mdlle. de Malcé, she will be comforted, I know, by my mere presence ; but none can, none will, under your careful guardianship ; I have such trust in you, dear Mrs. Stewart."

The widow absolutely quailed beneath that noble girl's confiding gaze, so warmly seconding her words.

"Have no fear of speaking your mind to her quite freely. She is rash and impulsive, but her disposition is so sweet, and she is so submissive amidst all her little follies, that she will presently yield to your reasoning and greater experience."

"Oh, she is not to have her own way, I told

her I should pray you to tighten the curb-rein in case she went galloping across country at too fierce a rate."

"Above all, encourage, I charge you, this, perhaps, romantic passion for retirement; her life can scarcely be too secluded a one while her guardian is away. You forgive the freedom of this advice, do you not? But on this point I confess I am so more than anxious, for you agree with me, I am sure, Mrs. Stewart, that on the choice of her present associates may depend her whole future, for weal or woe. She has already a host of admirers in her train, and is it a marvel? so bewilderingly beautiful; but keep them at bay, Mrs. Stewart, frown them down, and Constance gaily laughed. Mdlle. de Malcé is not much given to frowns herself, but I have no fears, for overflowing as she is with innocent mirth, or *was*, till this sad separation, it yet takes no shade of levity; but the world, the censorious world, Mrs. Stewart, may not judge her as we do. A fair name may be smiled away, whispered away." She paused; an indifferent person had smiled to hear this young pure girl, so wise as she thought herself, so ignorant as she really was in world-lore, giving sage counsel to Mrs. Stewart, who had breathed the contaminating breath of that world a score of years before Constance came into it.

"No, Mrs. Stewart, slander must not so much

as approach the affianced wife of the Earl of Castleton."

The companion started, almost stared. "Affianced wife, madam ! Surely not affianced ?"

"Affianced, Mrs. Stewart. Mdlle. de Malcé was solemnly affianced to the Earl of Castleton by the dying bed of her father, the late Count de Malcé."

"I did not know there had ever been any betrothal, any marriage contract, madam. Had it, may I ask, the sanction of Mdlle. de Malcé's guardian, of whom I, yesterday, heard for the first time ?"

"The Earl of Castleton, shortly to be her husband, is Mdlle. de Malcé's guardian, Mrs. Stewart ; and he is the most sensitive of men. In all that concerns her honour, and his own, for they are identical, he will be indeed exacting. To his ward, and future wife, he has confided that honour, a sacred deposit ; and if I know anything of Florence de Malcé, as such she will religiously guard it ;" and moved by her own earnestness, Constance abruptly quitted the room, leaving the widow stupefied by all she had just heard.

Mdlle. de Malcé affianced to Lord Castleton ! Lord Castleton her guardian ! affianced, too, in the presence of a dying parent !

And she had been described as a "foreign ad-

venturess," an "artful designing girl," who had spread her lures for the capture of a heart already devoted to another ; a light-of-love ! a coquette ! and worse, worse had been insinuated ; and now, in opposition to all this, came the revelation of the Lady Constance, and her spontaneous encomium of Mdlle. de Malcé, confirming her own impression on first beholding Florence, for she had then asked herself if it were indeed possible that that fair creature could be an artful designing coquette, feeling that nature must, in such a case, have been betrayed into a strange deceit, for surely never before did artifice guise itself in such a semblance of purity.

Yes, it was all false, false as the false heart that had coined the miserable lie ; and she had believed it, and believing it, had yet felt strange compunction, ay, even loathing at the thought of speeding to its consummation the ruin of one who, with such tender pitifulness, was heaping daily and hourly kindnesses upon her ; but now, now, there was twofold guilt in it, and she stood confessed, the deliberate and cold-blooded destroyer of the legally betrothed wife of one who had long loved, and with reverential homage, sought her for his bride.

She had pledged herself to the ruin, body and soul, of this defenceless girl ; by every means within her power, she was sworn to speed the

contamination of both, by ensnaring her into an association with the worthless of either sex.

She might well say ensnare, for she now saw how little likely was such a being as Florence de Malcé to fall a willing prey to their machinations.

Yes, Mrs. Stewart saw with her whole awakening faculties that she was the dupe, the wretched dupe of her kinswoman—saw, too, that there was no help for it. Remorse came too late. She was the purchased slave of one who would exact the bond. Had she not in express terms said as much? No; for *her* expiation was out of the question, she must wade through the slough of foulest treachery, and fawn, and flatter, and lie to the end. And some of the old rigid Puritan doctrines this woman had been taught, when a banned and helpless outcast she had knelt beside the aged couple who had reared her, came across the waste of memory, upbraiding her with her sin.

“Ye maun toil and toil, and toil, puir mitherless bairn, but ye'll no earn your bread by a lee. Ye'll be honest and true, Elsie.” So spake the “gude man,” and she had bowed her young head in unanswering submission. And now what was her daily life? to what foul service had she sold herself? Her life was a living lie; her office that of spy and decoy.

"Oh, my boy, my poor, misguided boy!" exclaimed the miserable woman, "bitterly indeed am I punished for my offence, for your mother can ask no blessing for you now; the good God would turn in wrath from the perjured pleader. Better both had died in the hour that gave you birth—oh, far better!"

Now Mrs. Stewart was perfectly correct in the view she took of her present position. She was to all intents and purposes the purchased slave of her haughty kinswoman, and never slave had more relentless task-master; no less was it true that never master had more reluctant servitor.

Well, anyway she was resolved to see and remonstrate with Lady Graham. After all, she was human. "If her heart could open to one love it could not be wholly closed up to all others. Perhaps she was really ignorant that these two were solemnly contracted in marriage, and that the contract was sanctified by a dying father's blessing."

Thus she argued, for to this woman's startled and affrighted conscience the deliberate attempt to rupture by fraud, such a compact was a crime, a dark and cruel one too, and she shuddered at the thought of its perpetration as at an act of sacrilege; to be brought about too by her instrumentality; there was the twofold sting.

She would go to Lady Graham, she would pray her to spare her this guilt, pray her to spare this innocent girl ; nay, to spare herself, for what but heart-breaking remorse must be the sequence to such foul treachery.

All this and much more was that night in this woman's mind to do, but night dreams and waking realities wear such strangely different aspects. Morning brought the dread presentiment that, in the presence of her proud kinswoman, she should turn coward, that she should be but as clay in the potter's hands. Yes, she might weep, and pray, even menace, but instinctively she felt that all would end in abject submission. Before the dare-devil spirit of her ladyship her own weak and wavering resolves would give up the ghost.

Poor Elsie Stewart! she was formed for better things, but a Pariah from her birth, a penniless dependent, with of late the burden of her boy's guilt to weigh her down, it promised to be a task of little difficulty to trample underfoot the small remnant of spirit her iron destiny had left her.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Thou wert set to watch, and not to prate,
Then do thine office,
And let it be in silence as behoves thee.

A MONTH has elapsed since the departure of Lady Constance, but that single month has yet sufficed to draw her thoughtless friend into the mazes of fashionable folly.

Again, buoyant with youthful spirits, she is floating on the dancing waves of pleasure, the acknowledged beauty of the season, for even Hope Beringford, the graceful, accomplished Hope Beringford, lacks the thousand nameless witcheries that lend so piquant a charm to her fair rival. But Miss Beringford's social advantages far out-top those of her friend (for they are friends, and warm ones too), and these will enable her to steer her well-manned vessel safe into port, while the gay but crazy little flotilla of Florence, in default of a pilot, has every chance of foundering among the rocks.

Miss Beringford is blessed with a mother, a tender and judicious one; a father, and a trio of brothers; and last, though not perhaps least, may be opined, in the fair girl's estimation, a

lover, soon to become her husband, but seldom absent from her side.

With such ballast the lady can hardly drift upon the rocks. Perhaps her natural reticence had sufficed to keep her afloat, but in the hour of peril it is safer to have a pilot on board.

The position of the heiress was one that called for the utmost circumspection, and of this quality she boasted not a tittle. Her intentions were invariably good, but she wanted steadiness of purpose to carry them out. She fancied she knew human nature—none could be more deplorably ignorant on this head. She credited herself with firm-mindedness—it had been difficult to have met with one half so yielding.

It had been her resolve to decline any overture, if any were made, of a renewal of intimacy with Mrs. Seymour, yet that resolve melted like snow on the wave at the first sentimental outburst of that lady to be restored to favour.

The next day the most elegant of perfumed billets conveyed a petition for the occasional use of her opera-box. How could assent be refused to so simple a request? “Poor thing! it must be so very dreadful—not to have an opera-box.” So the petition was accorded.

It never entered Mdlle. de Malcé’s head—how should it?—that her sage Mentor, duly instructed by Lady Graham, had purposely thrown herself

in Mrs. Seymour's path, and by studied courtesy paved the way for the reconciliation, and even for the subsequent request. Her ladyship had calculated that through this renewed intercourse with Mrs. Seymour, an introduction to that lady's sworn ally, the rather too notorious Mrs. Hamilton, would incontinently follow ; nor had she erred in her estimate, and the scandal to which it gave rise was almost identical with that introduction.

Night after night the Hon. Mrs. Seymour and the divorced wife of General Hamilton were to be seen in Mdlle. de Malcé's opera-box, no matter whether the fair proprietress were present or not.

On most occasions Florence was chaperoned by that very quiet and very respectable duenna, Mrs. Stewart, "a poor relation no doubt," was insinuated, "she looked a poor crushed dependent," and so she did, for remorse was tugging at her heart-strings. Sometimes Lady Graham herself condescended to enact the dragon over the "golden apple;" it suited her to have it seen by the surrounding boxes that by her mere presence she could awe and distance these semi-reputable worldlings (for they never graced the box on her ladyship's nights); she thereby maintained her credit with the world, a world that began already to shake its wise head, and hope,

and fear, and surmise, and indeed portend all imaginable and unimaginable ills to the heiress as the ultimatum to so reckless a course of extravagant follies. Meanwhile her ladyship, a virtuoso in crime, was impenetrably shrouded from suspicion by her wide-spread and stoic reputation ; nay, was even compassionated in some circles, for the very onerous task she had undertaken, that of curbing so high-mettled a racer as the lovely but wilful De Malcé, for her ladyship's unblushing mendacity with regard to that young lady passed with most for gospel truth.

Mrs. Stewart had not abandoned her intention of appealing to her kinswoman in Mdlle. de Malcé's behalf, but it was not easy to find an opportunity to do so, for her ladyship sedulously avoided all appearance of a private understanding between them, even treated her before others with a degree of hauteur bordering on contempt, but the notorious characters of several of the heiress's present associates appalled the heretofore rigid Calvinist, and again she asked herself the question, "Is this young girl to rush headlong to ruin without one uplifted finger to stay her?"

While blindly obeying her ladyship's instructions to endeavour to bring about the old intimacy with Mrs. Seymour, the companion was in

a measure ignorant of the very light esteem in which that lady was held by the more circumspect, but when that intimacy brought into the field a Mrs. Hamilton, and a man of such dissolute habits as Sir Harcourt Neville, she could no longer lay the flattering unction to her soul, that she was doing no great harm.

She knew that, however pure, Mdlle. de Malcé would be judged by her companionship. "Tell me your associates, and I'll tell you what you are," is a trite but true aphorism.

Well, she would disburthen her mind to her patroness at the first opportunity. Hear her she should.

On several occasions her ladyship had inquired of her kinswoman, with a degree of empressement she rarely allowed to be detected, whether any letter had been received from Italy; "Should any arrive, delay their delivery to Mdlle. de Malcé till I have consulted Lord Castleton in the matter."

"Your ladyship does not mean that I should suppress any such letter in the event of its coming into my hands?"

"Mrs. Stewart, I used the word *delay*. Let it suffice for all explanation, that Mdlle. de Malcé's guardian is averse to this Italian correspondence with, I believe, some Jesuit priest. You spoke of such letter falling into your hands

as a casualty. Understand me—it must fall into your hands, and from yours into mine. It is her guardian's will, and mine—you understand."

Now the pretext set up for the defence of a dishonest act was too shallow for the veriest dunce to accept, and Mistress Stewart was by no means a dunce, but she wanted both strength of mind and strength of nerve to throw off the trammels that fettered alike her judgment and her principle.

And soon a letter bearing the Milanese post-mark did reach Eaton Place, and though with a shuddering sense of her own degradation in the act the companion secreted it, for what purpose even to herself was not distinctly defined, and not long after set out for Brook Street, intent on her purposed expostulation with her ladyship, whom she began superstitiously to regard as her fate.

Her manner was abrupt even to rudeness as she entered the plain but well-ordered dressing-room of her half-sister. Glancing suspiciously, perhaps nervously, round, she first closed, then bolted the door.

Her ladyship had not expected her visitor, but no nerve of hers was shaken, though the threatening aspect of that visiter had made it scarcely a matter of surprise if the alternative of the dagger or the bowl of poison had been proposed. Nerves were not as much in vogue a

quarter of a century back as now ; anyway her ladyship ignored them in her own person.

" Is it quite prudent to venture hither, Mrs. Stewart ?" she coldly inquired, " unless you are an ambassadress from Mdlle. de Malcé. You know I would as much as possible avoid all private intercourse between us ; at all events, the appearance of a private understanding."

" I do know it, madam."

" Unless, indeed, the matter is of the last importance."

" The matter *is* of the last importance. I come to you, however, less as the ambassadress of another than on my own account. Lady Graham, I *cannot* bear the burden of guilt you would impose on me ; I *cannot* be your instrument in this infamous business."

The murder was out, and being so, whatever her previous weakness, Mrs. Stewart now stood dauntless and resolved ; there was even something contemptuous as well as menacing in her gesture as she thus confronted this statue of cast-iron, whose only reply to this outburst was a derisive smile. " Listen, for your ladyship must have misconceived this matter. Shall I tell you who and what this young girl really is whom we are hunting down to—oh, to worse than death ! or, rather, what she is not ? for no designing coquette, no mere wanton, as was

'insinuated, is the ward of Lord Castleton, but the best and purest of God's creatures. Lady Graham"—and the companion advanced full in front of her ladyship—"the poor and woe-stricken, raised by her from the slough of despair, bless her name ; the guilty are shamed into good by her angel sweetness. She is so guileless, and oh, woe is me ! she so trusts me !" and the woman knelt at the feet of her kinswoman. "Lady Graham, absolve me of my oath ; let me go back to beggary, for I will not wrong her!"

" You are eloquent, kinswoman. I have mistaken your vocation, which would seem cast for that of an actress or an orator. Pity such gifts should be thrown away upon such an insensate as myself ; but I am of the school of stoics, and eschew all rhapsodies. Reserve them for your Una, they are in her line, I believe."

Brought down from her altitude by this exquisite irony, and perhaps a trifle awed too, for a calm and passionless nature will generally control the more impassioned, the woman yet did not materially flinch from her purpose.

"Lady Graham," she exclaimed, as she rose to her feet, speaking in the low, concentrated tone of excited feeling, "they were solemnly betrothed these two ; betrothed by, and blessed with, the last breath of her own father. Did

you know this when you called her a wanton, a foreign adventuress, and said she had won him whom you loved from his allegiance to you? Did you, I ask, know? Oh, but you could not! Yet say you did not!" And it was almost with an air of distraction that the miserable woman gazed into her kinswoman's face.

"And do you know," she continued, finding no reply was vouchsafed, "that the Lady Constance Greville is the fast friend of this pure-minded girl? Oh, no, don't, don't sneer, Lady Graham, for she is pure as childhood's breath, pure as your own sweet bairn, and yet her intimate is the little less than infamous Mrs. Hamilton. You mark, madam, Mrs. Hamilton."

"You flatter our fair countrywoman," and her ladyship bowed with inimitable grace. "She is of fair Scotia's clime, I think?"

"Ay, and is its disgrace, no less than those who shamelessly—" Mrs. Stewart paused, and muttered inaudibly.

This time her ladyship reddened, not at what was uttered, but what was suppressed.

"I would ask you, Lady Graham, is your ward, for such by virtue of your promise o *motherly protection*"—oh the biting irony of those words!—"I now understand Mdlle. de Malcé to be—is she to be left to the inevitable consequences of this most fatal intimacy—Sir

Harcourt Neville, too, in the set? And I, to whom am I responsible? Must I give no account of my stewardship?"

"To me—yes; to others—no. To your first question there is this brief reply—leave her to her own unbridled passions, they will shipwreck her without much impetus from us."

"You are right, madam; without some warning voice they will; yet not her passions, but her innocent sense of security. Yes, inevitable, irretrievable ruin must ensue. In one sense it is certain as death."

A flash of joy, so malignant that it had startled the very Spirit of Evil, shot from Lady Graham's eyes.

Mrs. Stewart recoiled before its hideous interpretation; her employer saw that she did, and, sublime in duplicity, resolved to beat down her opponent with a different weapon to the one she had heretofore wielded.

At that moment it is probable that she regarded virtue much after the fashion of Sir Pertinax McSycophant, and had fain consigned it to a like doom. Anyway, she must change her tactics if she were to come off victor. This scorching sarcasm might goad to madness; she would appeal to the woman's feelings, they were keener; and her principles more rigid than she had calculated on.

"Enough of this, kinswoman ; this girl has bewitched you." Then changing her tone to one of unusual softness, she continued—"Do not let us quarrel. When saw you your son? where is he?"

Ah ! subtlest of womankind ! Destitute of feeling yourself, you yet knew how in others "to press upon the nerve whence agony is born."

The mother's eyes closed with a shudder, while the lips were compressed as though death's seal was already on them.

"I know not ; for weeks I have not seen him. Would God I had never left him for this unholy work."

"Would you that both starved ?"

"Better the body starve than the soul perish ; we could but have died. I could pray then ; pray for the guilty one. Ah ! God's judgment will too surely punish me through my boy !"

"But where is he—your boy ?"

"The good God alone knows ; with evil doers, it may be. Idleness and misery soon mate with such. Yes, the felon's dock may soon be his portion."

There was a dogged misery apparent in the utterance of these words, a dull and dark despair that had touched any heart but the indurated one of Lady Graham, and yet, had the motive been pure, how near to God-like was the act revealed by the next sentence.

"Your boy will fill no felon's dock if interest of mine may arrest such doom. Listen: he now holds a post of credit in the house of one of the first bankers of the day. *My* recommendation procured his admission there; my means equipped him for the office; your son, if he remain honest, is for ever provided for. Baulk me, and my hottest vengeance shall pursue him."

Pale, but speechless, with eyes starting from their sockets, the widowed mother gazed, and continued to gaze, upon the speaker.

"There, there, calm yourself," said her ladyship, almost caressingly. "This matter is but just arranged. To-night your boy shall be in your arms, and confirm your joy. Oh! why, why will you force me into so humiliating a dissection of my very soul? Why compel me to repeat that my interest in Lord Castleton's heart can alone be purchased by the downfall of this girl, who knows not what the ardour of love is. *Elsie Stewart, I saved your child—you will not save me!*"

At these words the pent-up feelings of the woman gave way, the tongue unloosed, and, reeling forward, she caught the hand of her half-sister.

"You have conquered, madam; I will do your bidding, though all hell yawned at my feet;"

and, drawing a foreign letter from her bosom, she laid it before her ladyship, and staggered from the room.

There was no capacity for feeling within the breast of Lady Graham, or the memory of that poor wan face, as it turned its last despairing glance upon her, had haunted her to her dying day.

But other thoughts now occupied her mind. His letter—Malgrove's kindly counsel to his friend's betrothed—was in her hands; that correspondence she had long been so anxious to intercept. With his hand she was not familiar, but the postmark—Milan—corresponded with the information she had received of his residence abroad;—everywhere she had spies. But not immediately was the seal of that letter broken. It requires a long apprenticeship to vice before you can confront it without some sense of shame.

Her ladyship filled a tumbler of water from the caraff, rose, sat down, again rose and opened the window, partly for air, partly from restlessness.

Amidst all her daring, something of disgust at the commission of such an act, something of wonder at herself that she could sink to it, arrested her hand even on the seal. Yet it was the meanness rather than the heinousness of the offence that paled the cheek and palsied the

hand; anyway, her scruples quickly melted into thin air.

Her ladyship read aloud, commenting as she read.

"Await, I conjure you," wrote Herbert, "Stratford's return, in the retirement of your country villa."

"Retirement of her country villa. Fool! Not while pleasure spreads her sails to court her fickle fancy."

She read on—"In doubt, in danger, or in difficulty, oh! hesitate not a moment in sending for Lady Constance."

"So, so! not so fast! Enough, and too much, of mischief already has your paragon wrought."

"For me," Herbert went on, "I will be with you quick as express can bring me, at the slightest hint that I can be of service to you."

"Will you so, proud meddling priest! Not if woman's wit may keep you in exile."

How unspeakably tender was each line of that letter! how earnest the exhortation to the betrothed of his friend to guard unsullied her own honour, and that of her future husband! how solemn the wind-up, in which he commended her to Almighty protection!

But what mattered it? No word was destined to meet the eye of her to whom it was addressed! Alas the day! Florence de Malcé, with all her

ineffable humanity, had provoked the enmity of a fiend—the worst of fiends, in a woman's breast—the fiend of jealousy!

“Dead men whisper no tales,” soliloquized her ladyship, as she deliberately dropped the letter into the flames. “So much for Buckingham!” and a low exultant laugh followed, that had in it a hate as deadly to the writer as ever was entertained by Richard of York to the doomed noble. Had the royal prerogative been hers, right gladly had she, in the case of the detested priest, prefaced her “So much for Buckingham!” with the tyrant’s “Off with his head!” “Anyway,” she muttered, “this has not been a day lost. For the immediate present, at least, this dangerous correspondence is quashed; and she—this sickly Puritan, with her delicate sensibilities—is mine, body and soul.”

Who is it says “Virtue lies in a nut-shell; Vice is a grander study?”

END OF VOL. II.

